Tokyo Ravens Volume2

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KouheiAzano

あだちの空

英雄ニート

RAVEN'S NEST

ファンタジア文庫

あざの耕平
●あざのこうへい

「神仙酒コンチェルト」でデビュー。徳島県出身。代表作として「Dクラッカーズ」「BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS」シリーズなど。この二巻、初稿が上がったのって、実は今年の頭だったりします。まさか作中時間通り九月に出ることになろうとは……やるなケイティ。

イラスト：すみ兵
カバーデザイン：伸童舎

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あざの耕平
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東京レイヴンズ2
RAVEN"s NEST

教室中から突き刺さる、視線、視線、視線。好奇と、僅かな敵意。級友から向けられる幾つもの視線に春虎（はるとら）は気圧される。けれど――

――バカ虎！

迷いのない、まっすぐな瞳。自分を見つめる幼なじみの少女――夏目（なつめ）の姿に、春虎は自分を取り戻す。

闇鴉たち（レイヴンズ）を育成する陰陽師育成機関、陰陽塾。夏目の式神として生きることを決めた春虎は、東京の陰陽塾に転入する。しかし、そこで春虎を待っていたのは、『しきたり』により男装した夏目と、土御門（つちみかど）に冷たい塾生たち――そして、二人を付け狙う呪術界の闇だった!?　時を超える陰×陽ファンタジー、学園編スタート!!

ファンタジア文庫
あざの耕平作品集

神仙酒コンチェルト

Dクラッカーズ I 接触―touch―
Dクラッカーズ II 祭典―ceremony―
Dクラッカーズ III 決意―resolution―
Dクラッカーズ IV 乱―rondo―
Dクラッカーズ V 追憶―refrain―
Dクラッカーズ VI 王国―the limited world―
Dクラッカーズ VII 王国―a boy & a girl―
Dクラッカーズ・ショート I 欠片―piece―
Dクラッカーズ・ショート II 週日―roots―
Dクラッカーズ＋プラス 世界―after kingdom―

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BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS S3 ―ブラック・ブラッド・ブラザーズ 短編集―
BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS S4 ―ブラック・ブラッド・ブラザーズ 短編集―
BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS S5 ―ブラック・ブラッド・ブラザーズ 短編集―
BLACK BLOOD BROTHERS S6 ―ブラック・ブラッド・ブラザーズ 短編集―

東京レイヴンズ 1 SHAMAN*CLAN
東京レイヴンズ 2 RAVEN"s NEST

下僕ドラゴン 2
RAVEN'S NEST

「おおお・・・お初にお目もじ致します――

祖狐葛の葉が御末裔、土御門春虎様の護法たるを仰せつかりました・・・コン、と申します」

「蠱毒……!!」

「な、なんだよあれ!?」

呪詛式——陰陽庁によって禁じられた呪術が、
春虎たちの前に現れる

「土御門夏目様
――我らが偉大なる、
北辰王よ」

「わた……ぼくは、夜光じゃ、ない……」

一章　小鴉たちの学舎　7
二章　イア・アンド・テール（0）　69
三章　式神勝負　156
四章　蠱事（まじわざ）　219
五章　その鬼、隻腕　260
あとがき　332

目次

上野、秋葉原、品川――そして渋谷

各地で一斉に起こるかつてない〈霊災〉

「2年前の再来じゃないか!?」

「春虎……ぼくと、一緒に」

「フェーズ4へ移行したぞ！」

閉鎖された宮内庁御霊部

進級試験最中、冬児を襲う異変

そして春虎たちの前に現れた、十二神将最凶の陰陽師――！

おいで――『こちら側』に……

東京レイヴンズ3 今冬 COMING SOON!

Chapter 1 - Young Ravens' Academy

Tsuchimikado Yakou had two retainers, to aid and protect him.

One named Hishamaru, and one named Kakugyouki.

Part 1

She knew it was him at first glance. The moment she first saw him, she couldn't control her intense heartbeat.

His handsome, proper facial features, a head of jet-black hair almost like a girl's, and particularly that exceptionally concentrated aura... He was independent, withdrawn, but it was hard to conceal his noble and stately presence.

Each student at the Onmyou Academy had areas of magic that they were talented at, but this person excelled at all of them. His presence was still the strongest among the new students.

The descendant of the great Onmyouji Abe no Seimei.

The heir to the Tsuchimikado Onmyoudou family.

The reincarnation of Tsuchimikado Yakou - who was said to be the ancestor of modern Onmyoudou, taboo among the magic community - Tsuchimikado Natsume.

No one in the classroom knew his life story, so he had his fill of attention, but at the same time no one expressed a desire to take the initiative to get close to him, so his existence stuck out like a sore thumb. He seemed to have realized the surrounding situation and his own position early on, so he deliberately stayed away from others, always adhering to a snobbish attitude.

He was always alone.

Maybe it had been so in the past as well.

"......Yeah."

So, when she sat in front of him, she knew that every student in the classroom drew in a breath, but she didn't care. Even if all of the students kept their distance from her later on, she would still accompany him. She had decided this since the day they had promised many years ago.

He noticed someone was approaching, raising his head . Glancing at him, his smile was so beautiful it didn't seem like a man's, a big difference from her past impression of him, but maybe what had changed was the vague memories inside her own heart.

Her heart thumped abnormally intensely.

She smiled cheerfully to conceal her accelerating heartbeat.

"I, It's been a while, Natsume-kun..... Do you still remember me?"

Doubt and caution showed from the pair of eyes gazing at her, seeming as if he didn't remember. No, it was possible he didn't recognize her.

She tried her best to suppress the anticipation and anxiety roaring in her heart, saying: "I'm Kurahashi Kyouko, from the Kurahashi family....."

She realized in her heart that these were already childhood memories from many years ago. Though they were memories that she could never forget, maybe he didn't feel the same.

But she still prayed, hoping that he was the same as she, hoping that he still remembered the events on that once-in-a-lifetime day.

But the moment he opened his mouth to say 'Ah, its you--', for some reason his face was pale, and his tone was hasty, as if he were trying to smooth things over.

His voice was abnormally shrill and clear, like a girl's.

His voice suddenly changed from her memories.

"Y, You're from the Kurahashi family - right? So? What do you need from me?"

His tone sounded a bit fretful, even angry.

He really had forgotten.

She couldn't fault him for it. She understood in her heart, but it was no small shock to her. Especially his cold attitude and the gaze he directed towards her like he was looking at an enemy.

However long ago she had realized that he might have forgotten, this cold look and attitude was outside of her expectations. She managed to control her emotions, unconsciously closing her mouth.

The silence was like a knife's edge cutting through her skin.

He was obviously distraught amidst the silence, turning his gaze to the side.

"I, If there's nothing, could you please leave? I want - Let me be alone."

He stood up after saying this, leaving her as if he were escaping.

She didn't chase after him, but stood there stunned while enduring the gazes of the room's students, her mind totally blank.

Before entering the academy, she hadn't even dreamed of this scene...

But, this was the reunion she had dreamed of.

Part 2

"Huh, here? It's this building? Is it really here?"

"Yeah."

Tsuchimikado Harutora opened his mouth with an expression of disbelief upon looking at the building towering before him. His good friend Ato Touji showed a bit of curiosity from next to him, raising his eyes to look at the building from under his bandanna.

The building's elegant and refined appearance clearly gave off a different style than the other buildings.

The glossy granite brick outer wall of the building was original, the orderly window frames were painted a bright scarlet to add a touch of beauty to the solid exterior, creating the overall impression. The building presented a concise modern style and displayed the solemn atmosphere of a temple at the same time.

The institution developing a handful of National Onmyouji, the Onmyou Academy.

The Onmyou Academy school building was currently towering in front of them.

"......I heard it was an 'Academy', so I thought it would be very old, and more importantly, wasn't it a historic school....."

"The Onmyou Academy has about half a century of history, but this is a new school building just completed last year."

"In other words, everything inside is new equipment? Onmyouji income is actually pretty good, huh?"

"I didn't know that."

Compared to the slightly shocked Harutora, Touji was just like always, replying indifferently.

The two of them stood before the academy building, wearing the same uniform.

However, the uniforms on their bodies were quite different from the uniforms of most students, as they were wearing deep, dark uniforms - the color of black plumage - modeled after Heian-era imperial clothing with some changes.

They were wearing the uniform of the Onmyou Academy, and the two of them would be Onmyou Academy students from today onward.

"......I still feel like I'm an outsider."

"You better prepare your heart."

"I was prepared to become an Onmyouji long ago..... probably?"

"Didn't you just correct yourself?"

Touji coldly pointed out.

It was unknown whether Touji's body was better or the uniform was made for taller people, but Touji stood out the first time he wore the Onmyou Academy uniform .

On the other hand, Harutora who still wasn't used to it fidgeted his body uncomfortably under his brand-new uniform.

"Since I have the spirit-seeing ability and I'm Natsume's shikigami, of course I prepared myself long ago. Or maybe I should say I had no choice but to obediently accept my fate....."

He unconsciously felt under his left eye as he said this.

There was a pentagram under Harutora's left eye, as if tattooed. It was the proof that he had sworn to become Natsume's shikigami - it could be said that this was the mark of an incantation.

Harutora and Natsume had both been born in a historic Onmyoudou family - the Tsuchimikado family. The two of them had been childhood friends since they were small. Shikigami could be described as 'retainers'

that served Onmyouji, and the Tsuchimikado tradition for many generations was that branch family members would become shikigami to serve the main family.

However, the branch family member Harutora didn't have any qualifications to become a practitioner, unlike the main family member Natsume who had showed genius from an early age. Because he had never developed the ability to see aura - the skill of spirit-seeing - he had naturally ignored the tradition that required him to become Natsume's shikigami, becoming an ordinary high school student studying in a mediocre high school instead.

However, on a summer day - actually, no more than half a month ago - Harutora had been pulled into some Onmyouji-caused business and had lost a good friend. In order to avenge his friend, he had become Natsume’s shikigami, and had decided to walk the path of an Onmyouji.

As the main family successor, Natsume had entered the Onmyou Academy after graduating from middle school, but Harutora had only followed in Natsume's footsteps after half a year and was entering the academy today.

Having said that...

".....It was really busy back then. After things ended, I frantically prepared for the entrance exam, and by the time I could actually enter the Onmyou Academy to become an Onmyouji, everything felt like a dream....."

"You seem scared to me."

"Can't you say it a bit more tactfully?"

The Tsuchimikado family had actually been the apex of national Onmyouji in the distant past, but it had long since deteriorated by now, losing its former glory, duties, and responsibilities. Though his father was an Onmyou doctor, Harutora himself had lived a life separate from Onmyouji.

Until half a month ago, when his fate had diverged.

Now, he had transferred to Tokyo, wore the Onmyou Academy uniform, and stood before the Onmyou Academy building. The sudden change in environment - or perhaps in 'life' - still perplexed him, regardless of how much he had resolved.

"It was really a long road to get here....."

"But you just arrived."

Touji's reply was as harsh as usual, contrasting to Harutora whose feelings were mixed.

But speaking of that, Touji was also transferring to the Onmyou Academy, though his position was different from Harutora's.

In the past, Touji had once been involved in a disaster caused by spirits - namely, a spiritual disaster - and because of the side-effects that he still suffered, he had to undergo the treatment of an Onmyou doctor..... who was Harutora's father. Affected by Harutora's decision to enter the world of Onmyouji, he had aspired to become an Onmyouji alongside him, in order to be able to look after himself.

"We're only standing at the starting line right now, so it's way too early to get scared..... Also, Harutora, you seem like you don't get your position at all. If you're not a bit more careful, you might get 'eaten'."

"What? What do you mean get 'eaten'?"

Harutora frowned upon hearing those threatening-sounding words.

Touji smirked, showing a conceited smile.

"Listen well. Even if you're a branch family, you were born as a Tsuchimikado after all. This is the Onmyou Academy, a gathering of students from around the nation whose goals are to become Onmyouji. It's different from the school we were at before, and everyone will react immediately upon hearing your name. This place is probably already in an uproar from your transfer, and you've probably gotten everyone's attention even before entering the academy."

"B, But, Natsume's here too. Since even the main family heir entered the academy, even if a branch family member like me comes too now....."

"Don't be naive!" Touji firmly rebuked him, responding to the flustered Harutora.

"Think carefully about it, what kind of position is the main family heir in the Onmyou Academy? She's the

next heir to the Tsuchimikado family, and is titled a ' prodigy'. Don't you think she would be known to all and much admired?"

"Uh, that, that makes sense....."

"And now you, a branch family member rather than a main family member, are suddenly transferring to the Onmyou Academy - and also at this strange time. In any case, no one in the industry doesn't know the Tsuchimikado name, and moreover the name is ' notorious', so the responses won't be too friendly. Make sense?"

"Uh, but....."

"There will be some people there holding pure curiosity towards the Tsuchimikado family, but there will be some who are jealous, as well as some people who plan on showing their ability by defeating a Tsuchimikado, even idiots who try to attach themselves to you..... With that, there should be a few people with the thoughts 'since the main family genius is unreachable , I should try the branch family new guy' - isn't that right ?"

"....."

Harutora really wanted to deny it with a loud 'you're wrong', but not only was he unable to deny it, he even believed that there was an extremely high chance.

Onmyouji was a widely-known profession in the spiritual-disaster-ridden modern era.

Even so, it was still a peculiar profession. Due to quality requirements, the Onmyouji community was closed and strongly exclusive. It wasn't limited to the practicing Onmyouji, but extended to students or trainees of this world, like Harutora and Touji who would step into this world from now on.

Incidentally, Harutora had full confidence in his bad luck.

"But I'm just an outsider!"

"What does that matter, since all they're concerned about is the name Tsuchimikado."

Touji replied calmly to the frightened, paled Harutora.

This friend of Harutora had once been a juvenile delinquent. His exterior was callous, but he was actually

a good guy. Harutora was confident that Touji would help him if he were pulled into danger.

"Alright, no need to be scared, you'll definitely be fine, Harutora."

"......This is the least convincing thing you've said this year."

Harutora stared askance at Touji. The originally ignorant anxiety and confusion had all been turned into actual feelings of danger and tension by Touji's remarks.

Even if he was Natsume's shikigami, it was actually just in name, and he had simply made a vow rather than taking up magical restraints, so his spiritual power hadn't visibly increased. He was still an outsider, just like the past.

But--

"......I can only endure it." Harutora murmured, once again looking at the Onmyou Academy towering before him.

He had already promised with Natsume. Also--

Wait and see, Hokuto.

He muttered for the friend who had disappeared without a trace - but who was still out there somewhere.

"......This uniform."

"Yeah?"

"I really wish I could wear it for Hokuto to see."

".....I guess."

For some reason, Touji only replied after a long time, with happiness, helplessness, guilt, and a wry smile mixed subtly into his expression. It seemed quite complex, but Harutora didn't pay attention.

"Alright, no point in dawdling here, let's go!"

Saying this, Harutora and Touji walked into the academy entrance together.

There were two sets of automatic doors positioned in the entrance of the Onmyou Academy, with a setting that resembled a fashionable corporate building rather than a school.

But...

"As expected of the Onmyou Academy, their security spells are top-notch." Touji suddenly spoke from in front of the doors, and Harutora replied with an 'indeed', expressing his agreement.

Touji's words didn't mean ordinary security, but rather a magical security spell. The basics of magic were to manipulate the omnipresent aura that existed in all beings. The aura inside the Onmyou Academy building was steadily greater than outside of the building. Though he didn't understand how this was the case, it seemed like some kind of mechanism created using magic.

Natsume had cast magic that gave him the spirit-seeing ability when she had made the originally spirit-insensitive Harutora into her shikigami, and therefore he was also able to feel the 'security spell' that Touji spoke of.

"Right, Natsume's place also had this kind of feeling."

"Yeah, never mind the main family mansion, all big buildings nowadays are equipped with these security systems against magic, since there are always spiritual disasters in Tokyo these days."

Saying this, Touji walked through the first set of automatic doors, and suddenly and immediately stopped as the second set of doors opened.

"Look."

"Komainu[1]?"

There were stone statues that looked like dogs or lions set to the left and right of the interior set of automatic doors, similar in shape and style to the komainu that were set in shrines. At first glance, this set of komainu seemed incompatible with the building's modern style, but it melded unexpectedly well with the building after a long look.

"Uh, this is pretty fitting for the Onmyou Academy environment."

"Don't touch them recklessly, they might bite."

"Haha, this is the Onmyou Academy after all, so it wouldn't be surprising if they could move or talk."

"Yes, I can indeed move, and I can also speak."

The komainu spoke, moving its body.

Harutora unconsciously leaped backwards, and even Touji who had been joking around widened his eyes in surprise.

"I, It moved! This thing actually spoke!"

"Why are you so panicked, didn't you just say that it wouldn't be surprising if we could move and speak?"

The komainu replied leisurely, its attitude contrasting with the dumbstruck Harutora. It spoke with a deep voice, and the other komainu nodded its head.

Touji composed himself and gazed at the komainu, asking: "......Shikigami?"

"Correct, but don't think of us as any ordinary shikigami."

"We are high-level manmade shikigami personally infused with magic by the principal herself, named Alpha and Omega. We have been in charge of this post on our master's orders since the Onmyou Academy opened."

The two komainu stood tall with pride. Though they looked from the outside like two stone statues, it seemed that they had the ability to flex and bend.

"Which of you is Alpha, and which is Omega?"

"I am Alpha."

"I am Omega."

The komainu on the left and right replied to Harutora's question in order, so in other words the right-hand komainu was Alpha, and the other one was Omega. One could notice with a careful glance that there was a short horn growing out of Omega's head.

Harutora shook his head blankly.

"Amazing, even Natsume's family doesn't have these kinds of things."

"What are you calling things, child? Don't be rude."

"These kinds of shikigami are indeed very rare, and they reside here even though they're the principal's shikigami, right? Could it be that you were constructed like a mechanical-type?"

"Oh, you're quite knowledgeable. However, having that much knowledge is natural since you are a student here."

The komainu replied to Harutora and Touji with quite an easygoing attitude, and though it used well-knit and arrogant language, maybe its personality was unexpectedly friendly.

"I had thought I was coming in for a company interview just now, but now it suddenly became a school of magic."

"It seems like there will be quite a few similar things here, pretty interesting."

Touji grinned at the Harutora who was shaking his head.

Then, Alpha corrected its posture.

"...We have already heard about your business, but we must complete our mission as given. First, state your names."

"Ah, okay, I'm Tsuchimikado Harutora."

"I'm Ato Touji."

The two of them stated their full names in succession, and the two komainu went motionless as if turning back into stone statues.

But, that state didn't last long, and after a momentary pause, the komainu opened their mouths again:

"The voiceprint and aura of Tsuchimikado Harutora and Ato Touji have been confirmed and recorded."

"Welcome to the Onmyou Academy. Learn well from your fellow students in order to refine yourselves and become excellent Onmyouji."

Alpha's and Omega's voices were solemn, and Harutora and Touji seemed to have gained entry into the school building's magic security system.

"We have also recorded your shikigami, but next time you will have to state your name yourself."

But, Alpha added on those words.

Harutora almost jumped in surprise, looking backwards at Touji and checking whether he had heard wrong. However, Touji shrugged his shoulders, also puzzled.

Harutora turned back to Alpha.

"Did you say my shikigami?"

"Correct."

"My shikigami has already been recorded? What does that mean? I don't have any shikigami."

Harutora knew very well that he was an outsider, and it was practically a miracle that he had gotten in to the Onmyou Academy. Of course, he had never had his own shikigami.

"Harutora, maybe it's referring to you being Natsume's shikigami?"

"Really? But that way of saying it is too strange. Alpha, can you say it clearly?"

Alpha opened its mouth, about to reply to Harutora's question-- "Wait." But Omega interrupted their conversation from the side.

Omega didn't move a single bit just like before, as if its soul had drifted away, and then moved again after a long while.

In the end, it was a komainu statue, so no change was visible in the expression on Omega's face.

But it still informed Harutora and Touji in a carefully composed tone:

"Our master has notified us that you two are to head directly to the principal's office."

"Is it them?"

"It seems so."

He leaned against the wall, standing in a blind spot by the first-floor corridor that was invisible from the

entrance, and watched the two students take the elevator with a genuinely interested gaze.

"......How boring-looking."

"Don’t say that, let's watch what happens first."

A light smile emerged on his lips, and then he pulled his body away from the wall, slowly leaving.

Part 3

The principal's office was at the top of the academy building.

After leaving the elevator that they hadn't been able to hear any machinery sounds from, Harutora and Touji walked to the end of the corridor.

This academy building had long, simply decorated hallways that were a bit monotonic. It seemed quite like a museum from the adornments that might be cursed objects or magical tools. On the wall, there were suits of armor, dirty pewter staffs, burial vestments, fixed-up katanas, and other things that seemed like rare artifacts to Harutora's eyes, every one catching his attention.

In addition, there wasn't a trace of dirt on the glass cases housing these objects, not a single speck of dust on the floor, and even the ornamental plants by the side had been meticulously taken care of.

".....Could it be that shikigami are responsible for cleaning this place?"

"It's very possible."

After all, this building had the komainu shikigami as security guards. Harutora felt very interested, imagining a scene of staff manipulating shikigami to clean secretly in the dead of night.

"I thought shikigami were used for battle, like the dragon and the horse Yukikaze that Natsume had..... The shikigami that the Mystical Investigators used had the same use, but could it be that there are actually domestic-use shikigami that are good at washing clothes and cleaning?"

"There are general shikigami sold on the market that have unlimited uses, but to use such first-class magic requires considerable qualifications, or in other words, only specialized Exorcists can use them. The price isn't cheap either, so if there were truly 'domestic' shikigami, I

don't think there would be many people who would find the money to buy them."

"......Excuse me, Touji, what's first-class magic?"

Harutora's question made Touji raise his brow, unable to help from sighing.

"I'm surprised you were able to get into the Onmyou Academy like that. They're the Onmyoudou guidelines formulated by the Onmyou Agency - simply put, it's the magic officially recognized as being effective."

Modern magic was split into two types, the first-class magic that the Onmyou Agency recognized as being truly effective, and the lower-class magic that did not fall in that category. The ancient 'forbidden magic' and most divination belonged to the latter.

Usage of most first-class magic required qualifications as an official Onmyouji, or more accurately, one needed to pass the First-Class or Second-Class Onmyou Exams set by the Onmyou Agency. Harutora and the others were entering the Onmyou Academy in order to obtain those official qualifications.

"As for first-class magic... Even shikigami aren't usually seen in daily life, since after all the usage of Onmyoudou is extremely limited."

"Uh..... why is that?'

"The laws were set that way."

Touji explained casually, his hands still stuck in his pockets.

Touji had spent a long time interested in Onmyoudou since the spiritual disaster had left side effects on his body. He relied on his self-taught knowledge, as compared to Harutora who lived without such cares but who was used to hearing about these things.

"I see, so in other words, the Onmyou Academy is an exception, with shikigami everywhere?"

"In the end, it's a place specially established and designed to foster Onmyouji."

"Could it be that even the teachers are shikigami - it couldn't go that far, right?"

"I at least know that there are shikigami among the students."

"Huh? Really?"

"Yeah, and he's even a fool."

Touji smiled maliciously, and Harutora went 'nn?', tilting his head. When the foolish shikigami finally noticed whom Touji was referring to, the two of them had already walked into the principal's office.

There was a simple sign hung on the plain door - ' Principal's Office'.

Touji ignored Harutora who had begun getting tense again, calmly knocking on the door to the principal's office.

No one responded.

He raised his hand, about to continue knocking, when-- "Come in." A response came from under his feet.

Harutora cried out like a surprised child, and Touji stepped back from the door, also concealing his surprise. A cat had approached the two of them at some time and now looked up at them from the floor.

It was a supple-furred calico cat, and it showed a keen gaze as it looked at Harutora and Touji, lightly knocking on the door with its long tail.

"The door's open, come in."

It seemed like a talking cat was next after the talking komainu.

"......Is this the principal's hobby? Or are Onmyouji-related facilities like this wherever you go?"

"How would I know?"

Harutora asked tiredly, and Touji also replied with a bitter expression. The cat arched its body with a bit of impatience, meowing like a normal cat as if urging them to hurry up and open the door.

"...Excuse us."

He called out to the principal's office. As soon as he opened the door, the cat quickly slipped past their feet, running into the room without any presence.

...Huh?

Upon entering the principal's office, Harutora instantly mumbled quietly. The atmosphere inside the room was extremely different from the corridor outside.

A calm, nostalgic atmosphere floated inside the room, like a Taisho-era cafe.

There were faded, light yellow walls, a deep red carpet laid out on the floor, and a metal coat rack along with a painted glass room divider. Behind the room divider was a space for receiving guests, and within it were placed corner chairs and a tan-colored table.

However, the most apparent thing in the room was the bookshelf covering two walls. A surprising quantity of books was arranged neatly on the bookshelf, and one could tell at a glance that it had been organized. There was Japanese literature as well as foreign literature, with even some ancient literature and documents also kept on them.

And deep inside the room...

There was a big redwood table placed in front of a large glass window, along with a small figure sitting quietly on the chair behind it.

Harutora and Touji looked at each other, as the two of them had both assumed that the principal was a man, but the person sitting on the chair was an elegant old woman.

The cat sat on the table, nimbly jumping onto the old woman's lap. She put down the book she had been reading, lightly stroking the cat.

Then, she raised her head, plucked down the glasses perched on her nose, and looked at Harutora and Touji.

"Welcome, I've been waiting a long time for you two."

Her voice was exactly the same as the cat's.

The hair reaching to her shoulders was gray, and though she was old, her sitting posture was quite upright , completely unindicative of her age. She wore a brown-colored kimono that suited her so well it seemed like a part of her body.

"Tsuchimikado Harutora-san and Ato Touji-san. Hello, I am the principal here, Kurahashi Miyo."

"H, Hello."

"....."

Harutora spoke a greeting, and Touji also nodded his head in respect. Then, the two of them answered the old woman - Kurahashi Miyo's request and moved in front of the table.

Maybe because he wasn't used to the uniform yet, or maybe as a result of the atmosphere given off by the room and the principal, Harutora felt like a child showing a new uniform to a seldom-seen grandmother rather than like meeting the principal for the first time.

The principal's eyes gazed at the two without faltering, and she suddenly beamed. "I see." She murmured suggestively.

"So you are Natsume-san's Hishamaru and Kakugyouki."

"What?'

Harutora was surprised, asking hastily. Touji quietly watched the principal, seemingly puzzling over her intent.

However, the principal quickly changed the topic with a warm smile.

"I remember it being mentioned before that you two didn't have the chance to touch upon Onmyoudou in your normal life."

Her tone was cordial as she stroked the cat on her lap.

"You should have already met Alpha and Omega on the first floor. In addition to them, this cat is also my shikigami. Did they surprise you?"

"Uh, a, a bit....."

"Then I'm very sorry, but please get used to it as soon as possible, because you will be living in 'this world' from now on."

The principal spoke, her gaze pointing at the two of them.

"Ato Touji-san, I already heard about your condition from Harutora-san's father. Your determination is quite remarkable, so please work hard to win against your side-effects." She first spoke to Touji.

Then, she turned to Harutora.

"Tsuchimikado Harutora-san, I have also heard your parents speak about you, and I have heard a bit from Natsume-san."

"Natsume? What did Natsume say?"

Harutora asked in surprise, and the principal smiled lightly, nodding.

"Yes, that child is quite polite. After you decided to enter the academy, he came to tell me that you were following the Tsuchimikado family tradition and that you had become his shikigami. And actually, I know people in the Onmyou Agency, so I had already heard things regarding the Dairenji Suzuka incident this summer."

Harutora and Touji hurriedly glanced at each other upon hearing the principal say this. The Onmyouji the

principal had mentioned - Dairenji Suzuka - had changed both of their lives, leading to the opportunity for them to enter the Onmyou Academy.

But, her incident hadn't been made public. On the outside, it was because of her age, but it was actually because of political considerations to try to keep the effect on public opinion as small as possible. Dairenji Suzuka was a National First-Class Onmyouji - one of the 'Twelve Divine Generals', the best of the best Onmyouji. The Onmyou Agency naturally wanted to keep the disaster caused by this elite as hushed-up as possible.

The Mystical Investigators who had been tasked with dealing with it had also strictly told Harutora and Touji that they couldn't talk about anything related to her or this matter, and there was only a small portion of people within the Onmyou Agency itself that knew the clear details.

"Maybe you two, who are essentially outsiders, wonder why you were admitted into the Onmyou Academy. I personally made an exception for you two and allowed you to pass, one reason being that I recognize your contribution in that matter."

"......A, As I thought....."

"Yeah, I thought so too."

Touji opened his mouth for the first time from next to the surprised Harutora, appearing to be quite calm.

The prospective Onmyouji from around the nation gathered at the Onmyou Academy, and it was very competitive. Even for a member of the Tsuchimikado family or someone who had taught himself, it wasn't that easy - and they hadn't even undergone formal procedures until right outside the academy doors. Harutora and Touji had also faintly felt that there had to be some secret behind it.

"You want to seal our mouths completely - is that the main reason?"

Touji asked with a challenging tone. Harutora cast a reproachful gaze at him, but his good friend didn't even look.

However, the principal maintained her good-natured expression, even admitting altogether: "I can't deny that thinking."

"But even so, you two do not lack quality. For example , Harutora-san, are you aware that your spiritual energy is far greater than the average person's?"

"Huh? Ah, now that you mention it, I remember the examiner telling me that I was only pretty good at raw power during my exam....."

Harutora recalled the events from that time. He hadn't heard that as praise back then, but had instead believed that he was being scolded for being appallingly bad.

"Letting untalented students in will at best frighten them. By my judgment, you two possess the talent to become excellent Onmyouji, and you were thus permitted to enter. Of course, there is a possibility that my judgment was wrong. Regardless, you have already officially entered the Onmyou Academy, and what happens after this will be up to your own hard work."

"Uh....."

...This person spoke really directly.

In contrast to her elegant demeanor, the principal spoke without beating around the bush. But, rather than saying she spoke plainly, perhaps the Onmyou Academy

treated its students with a different attitude from an ordinary school.

As Harutora was at a loss, Touji next to him was sizing up the principal. Honestly, Harutora was already certain that Touji would take to the Onmyou Academy like a fish to water.

...The school that this guy was suited for definitely wouldn't be too normal.

What about himself? Harutora was a bit anxious.

"Oh, right, there's one more thing. Take this as a small warning from an old woman like me."

Her demeanor turned on its head, as she showed a cautious - but also interested - look, gazing at Harutora and Touji.

"You two should know the 'rumors' regarding Natsume-san, right?"

The principal was direct beyond what they had imagined.

Touji quickly gathered his expression, but Harutora unconsciously stared at the principal. Needless to say, the two of them were well aware of what those rumors referred to.

The principal meant the rumors that Natsume was Tsuchimikado Yakou's reincarnation.

The principal was still unmoved, even after seeing Harutora's and Touji's attitudes turn rigid again.

"Due to the effects of the rumors, Natsume-san receives a lot of attention inside the academy, and that might affect you two as old acquaintances of Natsume-san. If you have any trouble, you are welcome to find me at any time, and if it's inconvenient for you to tell me, you can also speak with your homeroom teacher - I will introduce you to Ohtomo-sensei soon. We will assist you to the best of our abilities." She spoke, ignoring the pairs' reactions.

"That means....."

Harutora wanted to say something, but the principal had already spoken first: "But - I hope that you will get used to these circumstances as soon as possible."

"U, Used to?"

"Yes, since these things will be always bothering you in the future after all."

Harutora closed his mouth upon hearing that sentence. The principal had spoken true, but he had never imagined what kind of situation it would be.

Natsume had said that the adults around her had seen her from the angle of the rumor for as long as she had paid attention. During that event over the summer, Suzuka had also been after Natsume due to the rumor's effects. By now, Natsume should be unable to rid herself of the rumor's entanglement.

...Just being born in the Tsuchimikado main family was annoying enough.

He couldn't ignore it, and he hoped that he could more or less help Natsume and share her burden from the side. That thought had also been an important factor in Harutora's decision to become a shikigami.

...I can only endure it.....

Harutora once again silently thought of the words he had murmured upon entering the building.

The principal looked at the new student, a kind smile emerging on her face.

Then, she asked with a relaxed tone: "And at this point I am curious - what are your impressions of Tsuchimikado Yakou?"

"Impressions? Impressions of Yakou? Honestly, I don't have any particular impression other than that he's from long ago. He's like some famous relative..... but after that thing happened, I get the impression that he was a troublemaker."

"I understand. What do you think, Touji-san?"

".....I believe he was a great person in the magic community, and accomplished many amazing feats. In addition....."

"What?'

"He was a genius, without a doubt."

Touji replied calmly and boldly.

Tsuchimikado Yakou...

Half a century after the Tsuchimikado family had begun declining after the Meiji Restoration, during the hectic outbreak of the Pacific War in Japan, a genius magician showed himself.

Yakou revitalized Onmyoudou at the request of the military. He integrated the legends and magics of Japan, constructing a brand-new system of magic, which was ' Imperial Onmyoudou', the foundation of the currently adopted 'General Onmyoudou'.

However, during the aftermath of the Pacific War, there was a strong atmosphere of defeat, and the Japanese military ordered Yakou to perform a large-scale magic ceremony, but unfortunately it failed - most ordinary citizens believed this. Affected by the failure of the ceremony, Tokyo's aura became chaotic, leading to the occurrence of spiritual disasters that even now still happened often.

Japan was currently the only nation in the world that formally recognized and permitted the use of magic. Actually, this was to deal with the spiritual disasters - the curse Yakou left behind.

But, to quell the endless spiritual disasters, they relied on strong Onmyoudou - the blessing Yakou left behind.

The development of Onmyoudou was closely linked with spiritual disasters, and it was only because spiritual disasters happened that Onmyoudou hadn't been buried away. And tracing the roots back, both of these things had been brought about into the world by the same genius. Tsuchimikado Yakou's work had created the basis of the Japanese magic community.

...A world-changing genius would obviously grab attention.

Not even Natsume herself knew whether she was truly Yakou's reincarnation, and no one at all knew for sure. She indeed had talent as an Onmyouji, but currently it still couldn't be determined whether she was Yakou's equal. She didn't have any memories of a past life, and no obvious similarities could be seen from her.

But, Dairenji Suzuka of the Twelve Divine Generals believed Natsume was Yakou, and she probably wasn't the only one who firmly believed that.

Would Natsume remember her past life someday and realize that she was Yakou? When that day truly came, what kind of change would come over Natsume? As her shikigami, what would he do about it?

Just as Harutora was thinking helplessly..... The principal suddenly said: "...He really liked playing shogi[2]."

"What?" Harutora asked back, and Touji also showed a rare surprised look.

The principal didn't mind, continuing to speak:

"But he was very bad at shogi, perhaps it was a lack of talent? Being bad at shogi yet loving to challenge others at it - but he would sulk once he lost, bringing a headache to the person who played against him. But I always was very grateful to him for persistently teaching me shogi. Otherwise, I probably wouldn't have known what shogi was for my whole life."

She smiled nostalgically as she spoke. Harutora was perplexed for some time, but it dawned to Touji in a snap . His eyes widened from under his bandanna.

"......You saw Tsuchimikado Yakou when he was alive?
"

"Yes, I was still a child back then."

The principal revealed it readily. Touji closed his mouth upon hearing this, but Harutora opened his own.

"Really!? You met Yakou?"

"Of course I did. Maybe you youngsters think he was someone from ancient times - but don't forget, it was only half a century ago that Japan was enveloped by the flames of war."

The principal smiled, seeming to say: 'there's nothing incredible about this.'

But Harutora still couldn't conceal his shock.

...The principal had met Yakou..... I see, so there were still people who had seen Yakou with their own eyes.....!

Yakou was a historical figure in the view of Tsuchimikado Harutora, but someone who had actually

experienced that 'historical' figure was right before him. He couldn't help but feel an abnormal atmosphere of heaviness, unable to speak for some time.

...But..... Saying it like it wasn't anything unusual.....

The person before him had already lived quite a long life before becoming the 'Onmyou Academy Principal'. She had lived through a youth just like his, experienced war, grew up, had a family - she had actually lived many long years. Harutora had looked at her before as her identity as 'principal', rather than as 'Kurahashi Miyo'.

The president then spoke to the speechless Harutora: " Yakou was also the same, Harutora-san." ...As if peering into his thoughts.

"Tsuchimikado Yakou was also the same as you, born into the Tsuchimikado family, growing up in a traditional family, and then shining brilliantly before finally being engulfed by the era. His life was indeed unusual, but he could cry and laugh, just an ordinary person."

"An ordinary person....."

"Right, but there are also some people who do not understand this. As a Tsuchimikado, maybe you believe Yakou was the culprit of your family's decline - a stain on the magic community, but you know this, right? There are indeed people who hold the complete opposite thoughts."

"The opposite thoughts..... What does that mean?'

"There is a group that views Yakou as a hero and paints him in the colors of a god..... They are the Yakou-worshipping fanatics."

Harutora cast a questioning glance towards Touji at this name he had never heard before, but it seemed like it was also Touji's first time hearing it.

"They ignore the ordinary human in Yakou, blindly worshipping him..... Unfortunately, Natsume-san's matter has also reached their ears, and they have even tried contacting Natsume-san before."

"Th, They came to find Natsume? How....."

He hadn't known about that. In short, Natsume was being eyed by a group of crazy fanatics.

"The circumstances I want you two to get used to also include these dangers. They are convinced that the rumors are true. I know it sounds absurd, but that is reality."

The principal warned them sternly. Harutora was speechless.

"Impressions are also one form of magic..... and also a curse." The principal slowly spoke:

"Rumors are the same. This form of magic bewitches human hearts..... The magic that Onmyoudou does not recognize as actually effective is collectively referred to as second-class magic, but regardless of first or second class, magic is magic. What's more, this truly terrifying and powerful magic is strictly classified as second-class, but perhaps that is too hard for you two to understand."

"....."

Harutora and Touji were silent, and the cat on the principal's lap yawned, as if saying impatiently: 'What part's hard to understand?'

"......Harutora-san, Touji-san, you may encounter a great deal of difficulty in the future, so please work hard and overcome it step by step. I'm looking forward to your future performance, from the position of an individual as well as from my position as principal."

Saying this, the principal smiled.

Just then, as if spotting that the conversation inside the room had come to a halt, the sound of a knock came from behind them. "Excuse me....." Saying this, a man poked his head inside.

"Principal? It's already past the designated time, do you still need a moment?"

"Oh my, I've made you wait, I'm sorry. We just finished here."

"Ah, that's perfect."

A lanky man walked into the principal's office.

He seemed relatively young, but didn't seem very energetic. His hair was messy, he had a pair of worldly glasses, and he wore an aged shirt and tie covered by a

cheap suit and a pair of rumpled pants. A mild smile emerged on his thin face, making him give more of an impression of being 'weak' than 'gentle'.

But, the most eye-catching portion of his body was undoubtedly the cane in his right hand. When he entered the room, he had been propping himself up with that cane, shuffling forward - glancing down, a wooden stick extended out of his right pants leg.

It was a fake leg, and one that couldn't appear in this modern era - a vintage fake leg like something that medieval pirates had used.

Perhaps noticing their gazes, the man smiled cordially, lifting his right fake leg.

"Oh? This? It's cool, isn't it? I'm a teacher in this academy, but I'm also an Onmyouji, so I've gotta boast about my prestige."

What was stunning was, the man spoke extremely brightly.

They had no idea what he was proud about - what's more, they couldn't understand what kind of prestige that fake leg boasted about, but his attitude was quite enthusiastic and he spoke with a Kansai accent.

...What a strange person.....

Realizing he was rude, Harutora's face still twitched slightly.

"This is your homeroom teacher, Ohtomo Jin-sensei. Don't judge him by his appearance, he's extremely capable." The principal smiled as she spoke.

"How can you say that principal. Ah, whatever, that's how it is anyway, I hope we get along."

Saying this, Ohtomo grinned. Though he looked like an extremely unreliable weakling from the outside, his smile was full of vigor.

"Then let's go, everyone's waiting for you two in the classroom - Principal, I'll be leaving."

Ohtomo lowered his head in a salute, bringing Harutora and Touji out of the principal's room.

The cat purred, as if cautioning them: 'Work hard.'

Part 4

"Wasn't it scary~?"

Once they walked into the corridor, Ohtomo whispered to Harutora and Touji as if he were saying bad things in secret.

"Uh? What's scary?"

"Of course the principal..... Did you guys not know? That old lady looks like a corporate boss, but and actually she's a big behind-the-scenes figure in this industry."

"What? You're talking about the principal?"

"Right..... On the other hand, aren't you a Tsuchimikado? How do you not even know this little thing?"

Ohtomo was puzzled, but Harutora was at a loss, not understanding what he meant.

"Ah."

Ohtomo's words led to a reaction from Touji from next to Harutora.

"So it was that Kurahashi....."

Touji murmured. "Right." Ohtomo chimed in.

It seemed that only the clueless Harutora was on the outside, and he gave Touji a dissatisfied glance. Touji, however, returned him a look that said: 'I'll explain to you later'.

"You should be careful, the principal's shikigami are everywhere in this academy, so you'll be caught in an instant if you dare to cut class. But if you guys need to cut class for something, you can come ask me. I said just now that I'm a specialist, so I can give you tips on how to avoid the principal's eyes and ears."

This kind of teacher who talked openly about cutting class the first time he met his students seemed like he couldn't be relied upon. Harutora made an indifferent ' yeah', and Touji also frowned. But it seemed that he had this kind of reaction because he wasn't sure what kind of person this teacher was.

"In any case, the principal already told me your situation. If you have some troubles, don't hesitate to talk to me."

Ohtomo spoke cheerfully, a completely unbothered appearance. As expected of the Onmyou Academy, the principal and the teachers were all definitely unique.

...As such, could the students here all be oddballs?

Harutora's gaze sank as if he were contemplating this.

Suddenly, he opened his mouth to ask: "Ah, right, sensei, can I ask you something?"

"Yeah? You found troubles that quickly?"

"No, I can't call it a trouble - The principal said something strange when she first saw us, do you know what 'Hishamaru' and 'Kakugyouki' refer to?"

When Ohtomo who hobbled in front of them leaning on his cane heard that, he stopped.

He turned around, his face full of wonder - he glanced at Harutora, showing a prying look.

Then, he turned his confused gaze to Touji.

Touji shrugged his shoulders, saying: "Didn't you hear about our situation? This person is actually a Tsuchimikado, but to put it plainly, he's ignorant about Onmyoudou."

"...Ah? How can you say that Touji, could it be that you know?"

Harutora asked, but Touji nodded his head naturally to respond. Ohtomo murmured the words "......I see" in revelation after watching the two of them interact.

Then his face became somewhat serious.

"Harutora-san, Hishamaru and Kakugyouki refer to the names of shikigami."

"Shikigami?"

"Correct, they were the shikigami of Tsuchimikado Yakou."

"Huh?"

Harutora gasped lightly, and Ohtomo showed a gloomy smile a bit different from before.

"It was said that Yakou kept at least a thousand shikigami, but among them were two retainers who were always to their master's left and right..... Hishamaru and Kakugyouki."

"Yakou's....."

Harutora finally understood the meaning of the words that the principal had uttered.

Natsume's Hishamaru and Kakugyouki.

The principal had not only compared Natsume to Yakou, but she had given Harutora and Touji similar evaluations.

In other words.....

...The principal also believed the rumor was true?

A cold shiver seemed to go up his back.

".....The two retainers became Onmyou officers in the old Japanese military, and even in wartime, the shikigami possessed rank and exceptional treatment. But, the two retainers' powers were strong, and they are still objects of admiration even now."

After explaining, Ohtomo started walking on his lame leg again. Harutora hurriedly followed, and Touji also began striding silently.

After that, the wordy Ohtomo didn't utter any more words.

They rode the elevator down, walking into the corridor under Ohtomo's direction.

Not long after - "We're here." Ohtomo stopped in front of a door.

A feeling of unrest came from behind the door, clearly a congregation of similarly aged youths, giving off the peculiar atmosphere of a 'school classroom'.

...It was here.

Harutora was very familiar with this feeling, as opposed to the other areas of the Onmyou Academy, but this agitated his tension even more. It was kind of ' transfer student tension'. Harutora had lived in the same place since he had been small, so he had never experienced transferring schools since elementary school.

He glanced secretly at Touji, noticing that he still had the same indifferent appearance. He also tried putting on a calm front, but he couldn't suppress the rapidly accelerating throbbing of his chest.

Ohtomo put his hand on the doorknob, turning around and saying with a smile: "Are you two prepared!"

Upon opening the door, a burst of noise instantly spilled out of the classroom - and then it fell silent.

"Alright~ Sorry about the wait, I brought the eagerly awaited transfer students~"

Ohtomo entered the classroom without a care, and Harutora followed behind his back uneasily.

The classroom was quite spacious and wide, and the ceiling was quite high, with the configuration of the

classroom completely different from his public high school. The floor was tilted so that it was raised in the back, and the fixed desks and chairs were fanned out, giving Harutora the impression that the classroom was a small concert hall.

Then--

Several similarly aged boys and girls wore the Onmyou Academy uniform, sitting in the raised rows of seats and gazing at them.

The male uniform was jet-black, and the female uniform was pure white. Maybe because of this unique design style, it gave off the strange impression of a group of black and white crows.

...Uwah!

Gazes shot towards him from everywhere in the classroom.

Even though they were just gazes, the many that were gathered together even gave him a feeling of weight. He, who normally used a shield of indifference to protect his

slothful self, now felt as if he had been forced to remove his weapons and pushed unarmed before the eyes of many.

"Okay, everyone look here~ These two are the students who will be joining this class starting today, Tsuchimikado Harutora-san and Ato Touji-san. Okay, please greet everyone."

".....I, I'm Tsuchimikado Harutora."

"I'm Ato Touji."

"Yeah - Hey, your introductions are too short. The first impression is very important, you have to express a little more."

Ohtomo shook his head, seeming like he felt bored. Maybe Touji didn't have a problem with it, but Harutora felt helpless, and he was really concerned about those gazes staring at him and the numerous academy students behind them.

...'Be careful that you don't get 'eaten'.'

Touji's warning flashed through his mind. Harutora was never able to judge what kind of gazes were

watching him - were they filled with malice or curiosity, or perhaps just checking out new faces. But Touji's warning stuck in his mind, and these gazes seemed like they also held some malice.

More importantly, could an outsider like him compare to a classroom like this that was full of students from around the nation who had set their targets on becoming Onmyouji?

His knees shook nervously.

His throat was incredibly dry.

Just then.....

Bakatora!

...Huh?

He seemed to have heard someone speak, but of course that hadn't happened. Actually, he had just heard the whispering of students and Ohtomo's leisurely voice.

But at the same time, he also noticed that gaze.

Those two eyes looking at him, and that sincere and warm gaze.

He looked up, seeing - Natsume.

Natsume was in front of his eyes.

Her back was straight as she sat on a chair in the corner of the room, looking straight towards him. She was just quietly sitting there, but she was so striking that he was surprised he hadn't noticed her sooner.

Her silky black hair was tied with a pink ribbon, and her beauty was like fresh flowers placed in the sunlight, shaded with a dreamlike pale shadow.

On the other hand, he could see immediately the spirit, pride, and noble qualities hidden deep within her. Natsume also gave off a unique feeling from the other students in the room, as if her existence was different from the others.

...Right, here.....

He had originally thought that this was a place with enemies on all sides, with not a single person who wasn't a stranger he had never met.

But, that wasn't the case.

Natsume was in the Onmyou Academy.

She was Harutora's childhood friend, the master that he served as a shikigami.

Entering the Onmyou Academy was equivalent to coming to Natsume's side. His tense body and mind suddenly and magically relaxed as he thought this.

On the other hand, what kind of expression was that?

She hadn't made any other noticeable actions, and she just sat in her seat, looking at Harutora and Touji who were at the podium.

However, her round eyes were flashing - a clear, lively light. Her white face was slightly red, and he could see that her breathing was definitely fast.

It was like when she had been a child - She was like a child who couldn't hide her joy at being reunited with her companion at long last. Harutora forgot about his position for a moment, smiling wryly.

This half-year, Natsume had by herself been enduring the gazes shot towards her, all to welcome this moment - to greet her 'companion'.

Because of this, the normally calm Natsume was so joyful and palpably excited.

...I've kept you waiting.

Harutora looked back at Natsume with those kinds of feelings. Maybe he was oversensitive, but he seemed to notice the light in Natsume's eyes become even more gorgeous and her nostrils flare gently. Of course, if he asked her later, she would definitely deny him with a red face: 'That didn't happen!'

But--

He really wasn't used to seeing that manner of dress.

The childhood friend in front of him, his master, Natsume.

It was just that her appearance was a bit different from the Natsume that Harutora was familiar with.

The main family girl was now wearing a black uniform - the male uniform, her hair tied up into a ponytail. It was his second time seeing this manner of dress with his own eyes.

...So there really was this kind of tradition.....

The Tsuchimikado heir had to act as a male to outsiders.

Just like the tradition that 'branch family members had to become main family shikigami' that Harutora had, this seemed to be a main family tradition. Natsume was bound by the tradition, entering the Onmyou Academy as a male while hiding her own gender. Harutora had learned this the very first day he arrived at Tokyo - just yesterday.

...How had she not let anything out of the bag, and she even left her hair that long.....

He wouldn't tell Natsume the truth even under threat of death, but fortunately her current slender body wasn't one that most would consider 'feminine'. However, her face was thinner than a male's, and if she spoke with her original voice, it would definitely give rise to suspicion. And she even used a pink ribbon to tie up her hair, so he really didn't understand how her disguise somehow hadn't been seen through.

Actually, Natsume's appearance looked like a 'girl posing as a boy' no matter how Harutora's knowing eyes looked at her, giving her the look of a high school girl desperately trying to mix into a boy's school, with her clothing seeming somewhat unnatural.

...It was probably because Natsume didn't have any good friends here.

The Natsume that Harutora was familiar with was extremely shy and lacked sociability, and adding to that the rumor that she was Yakou's reincarnation, she probably didn't have a single good friend at all, so her true gender hadn't been brought to light.

How long could she keep hiding it?

Natsume was indeed an androgynous girl, but she was only sixteen now and would definitely become more and more feminine in the future, both on the inside and outside. Could she really keep her secret concealed like that? A perturbed feeling different from the one before suddenly arose in Harutora's heart.

"They entered half a year later than everyone else and they might not be able to keep up with the pace of the class at the start, so everyone please look out for them."

Ohtomo spoke with a relaxed grin. In any case, the self-introductions ended here for now.

But, just as Ohtomo's voice dropped off, a snow-white arm was raised up high.

A hand rose from the center of the classroom.

Harutora's gaze was led away, moving from Natsume.

...Oh, how cute.

A white-clothed female student was quietly raising her hand.

Her slightly curled brown hair was tied up, with locks hanging down gently on either side of her face. Her gaze was clear and sharp, her eyelashes curled and thin, and her face was made up with a touch of brilliant lipstick, pairing well with her healthy skin and giving off a cute but definitely not showy feeling.

Her face was small, not even losing to Natsume's, and her body looked even more graceful from it. Compared to Natsume's androgynous frame, she was a completely feminine beautiful girl, and it wouldn't be too much to compare her to a member of an idol group - or even the leader.

"Ohtomo-sensei, I have a question."

The girl asked with a pretty voice and bright tone. Ohtomo happily responded: "Kyouko-kun?" It seemed like her name was Kyouko.

"Go ahead and ask, like about their three sizes..... actually, never mind a guy's three sizes, go for something like interests or whether they have girlfriends....."

Wasn't he replying a bit carelessly? Harutora looked askance at Ohtomo.

But--

"Isn't it very strange for them to suddenly transfer at this time? That's violating the Onmyou Academy regulations. Wouldn't they normally wait until the next year to be admitted?"

The girl - Kyouko - worded it as strictly as a severe lashing.

There was clear malice showing in her tone - No, it wasn't that kind of dark malice, but a fretful feeling of unhappiness.

...Ah, this person.

One had shown up, Harutora thought. Touji had long since expected that there would be students who reacted like this. Harutora trembled, but a cold smile emerged on Touji's face.

On the other hand, Ohtomo's attitude was still carefree , without any embarrassment in his expression.

"Right, actually the situation is a bit complicated, forcing them to enter at this unusual time."

"Can I ask what kind of situation it is?"

"You know, it's that kind of situation."

"Is it a situation that can't be made public?"

"That's right."

Ohtomo smiled from below, and Kyouko's cheeks instantly flushed red.

"We managed to enter the Onmyou Academy by working desperately for the exam that is only held once a year! How can those people so easily enter because of some reason that can't be made public?"

"They also took the exam."

"Even so, then wasn't the exam specially arranged for the two of them? That's not fair at all!"

"In the end, luck is also a form of strength."

"Please don't ignore me with a joke!"

Kyouko berated him resentfully. Then, she breathed deeply as if noticing that Ohtomo was leading her by the nose, regaining her calmness.

Though it had only been a moment, the gaze she stared at Ohtomo with had suddenly turned to Harutora. Their gazes crossed, and she immediately turned away, an undisguised expression of disregard on her face, to stare back at Ohtomo.

Then, she asked with a calm and loud voice: "......Is it because he's a Tsuchimikado?"

The air in the classroom instantly tightened because of those words.

"Tsuchimikado family members can get special treatment? Isn't that unfair?"

...As expected.....

Things had developed as Touji had predicted. Harutora had instantly become the center of discussion, and couldn't help but want to cry.

He glanced at the look on Touji's face, and the two of them just happened to look at each other. He knew without asking that he clearly had a mocking look, seeming to say 'you're quite welcome'. Thinking carefully , even if Touji wasn't a Tsuchimikado himself, he should still be deeply troubled by this discussion, but that look was like excitement at stirring up trouble right after arriving. How carefree.

...But.....

It wasn't like Harutora didn't understand Kyouko's declaration. The special treatment Harutora and Touji had received really was unpleasant to the eyes of the students who had worked so hard to prepare for the Onmyou Academy entrance exam.

But, even if he knew she was dissatisfied enough to deliberately challenge it before the entire class, he really didn't know how to respond, and it probably would have been preferable for her to bring it up with him in private.

...What should he do?

As soon as the name Tsuchimikado came out, the buzz in the classroom ceased. Ohtomo murmured quietly, troubled over how to respond. In any case, he should first deny that it was unfair! Harutora thought this, but maybe that man felt inside that things were interesting.

It seemed that it was up to him to justify himself. Just as Harutora was thinking this.....

"Don't go too far." A righteous voice broke through the noise in the room.

The voice came from Natsume.

She stood up, her hands placed on the table. Harutora wasn't the only one surprised, as Kyouko and the other students were the same. Everyone in the classroom - including Ohtomo - all turned towards the corner of the classroom in surprise.

But, Natsume paid no heed to the reactions around her .

"Kurahashi Kyouko, can I ask the reasons you bring up the Tsuchimikado? As a fellow Tsuchimikado, I need to clarify that the Tsuchimikado family does not require any special accommodations from the Onmyou Academy . If you're just saying it carelessly, then it's a great insult to both Harutora and I. Please take that back and apologize to him."

Her tone was forceful but not clearly rude, like the slash of a sharp sword. The classroom fell silent, every student holding his or her breath.

With Natsume's remarks, Kyouko's face lost its color like she had received an attack.

But, she didn't back down from this.

"I, In any case, please explain the situation clearly."

She went on the offensive instead, staring at Natsume.

"There's no convincing explanation! If you can't explain it, wouldn't most people guess that the power of the Tsuchimikado family must be working from behind the scenes? Also--"

Kyouko suddenly stood up, staring at Natsume while pointing at Harutora behind the podium.

Harutora was about to speak, but she took the initiative and continued speaking.

"Natsume-kun, isn't he your shikigami? You especially allowed for him to enter the Onmyou Academy to let your shikigami be with you - wouldn't anyone guess that ?"

Kyouko's way of speaking led the classroom to begin buzzing again, and Harutora was also surprised. He had always thought that only Natsume, Touji, and he himself knew about him being Natsume's shikigami.

"It's way too outdated to make humans into shikigami, but it's a lot like something the Tsuchimikado would do."

Kyouko spoke, deliberately putting on a cold smile. That appearance was extremely imposing, not to be taken lightly by any means.

But Natsume didn't lose in terms of imposing.

"Total nonsense. Harutora is my shikigami, but that is no proof that he used unfair means to enter the Onmyou Academy. Isn't that natural? After all, why would the Onmyou Academy make a special exemption for a mere ordinary student? He is my shikigami, that is indeed a reason why he entered, but it has nothing to do with why he entered right now. Enough is enough of your nonsense."

Natsume sounded coherent and emotionless. Kyouko rose up again, her look not letting Natsume go.

"A mere ordinary student? You're the heir to the Tsuchimikado family--"

"Then let me correct myself according to your words. For the 'mere heir to the Tsuchimikado family', right? Do you believe the most prominent Onmyouji training facility in the nation would especially help a student who didn't deserve it and destroy its own reputation? You

should also know that the current Tsuchimikado family has declined. If you really doubt, then your own family should be the biggest suspect, right?'

Natsume spoke coldly, and Kyouko's face went ashen.

"S, So I said, what kind of secret does he have to enter at such a strange time?"

"Didn't you hear sensei's words? Sensei already said that he couldn’t inform us."

"I can't accept that!"

"It's not your choice. What's more, whether you accept it or not doesn't concern us or the Onmyou Academy. This matter has no connection to you at all, and you have no right to know."

"Wha.....!"

"If you hinder our class with such groundless speculation again, please leave the classroom. The Onmyou Academy is a place to learn Onmyoudou, so don't use it to satisfy your own desires."

From the ears of a third-party observer like Harutora, this was quite an intense denouncement. Even if he felt happy that she was standing up for him like this, he still couldn't help but be stunned and think: 'no wonder this person can't make friends.'

...And moreover that idiot also felt like she had 'won', showing a self-satisfied look.....

Though Natsume was pretending to be calm, Harutora could see at a glance that she was abnormally excited. In particular, this tongue-lashing she had given in order to stand up for Harutora looked like it would have the opposite effect from afar, equivalent to making him into a collective enemy right after entering.

Harutora turned to look at Ohtomo as if he had remembered something.

".....You're not going to stop them?"

"Huh? .....Oh my! I forgot!"

This teacher wasn't just unreliable, he didn't even pay attention to anything. Harutora could take a furtive glance at his only remaining companion, Touji. Though

Touji was deliberately showing an indifferent attitude, he was actually showing a look of concealed excitement as he stood on the sidelines.

The future would be tough.

Harutora looked at the two girls who were arguing enough to scatter sparks - one of them also a girl wearing male clothing - and felt a bleak outlook for the future.

Chapter 2 - Ears and Tail

Part 1

"Harutora, since you weren't wrong, you don't have to care about her."

"How can I....."

The morning classes had ended, with Harutora still carrying awkward feelings after the disastrous self-introduction. His shoulders were tired and heavy, as if they were stone, making him slump on the classroom desk out of exhaustion.

It was the noon break. The many students - including Kyouko just now - left the room, venturing out to eat. Of course, no one dared to chat with Harutora, who had caused an uproar as soon as he entered the classroom.

There was just one male who was an exception.

"Haaaah..."

Touji gave an undisguised grin, himself half an outsider.

"Becoming remarkable the moment you enter, simply perfect, Harutora."

"What 'perfect' are you talking about, it's all over."

"That's not the case, showing a display of power at the start to gauge everyone's reaction counts as a way of looking for strong people, it's not bad."

"Damn, to think you have that kind of carefree attitude ... More importantly, I wasn't the one displaying power."

Touji would normally undoubtedly be the one who was more eye-catching, and never Harutora, but this time Touji had been completely outshadowed behind the 'Tsuchimikado pair', even saying: "This way, it's a lot more convenient to move around, so I approve."

"Right, Natsume. Is that student named Kyouko always like that? She seemed to have some deep hatred for the Tsuchimikado family."

Touji asked, but Natsume shook her head soberly.

"No..... She doesn't let up opportunities to attack me, but she rarely displays her opposition to me like she did today. Thanks to her, I also felt a bit fired up."

"......I didn't see it as only 'a bit'."

"What are you dissatisfied about? Harutora, I spoke out for you. On the other hand, protecting my own shikigami is only natural."

Natsume spoke nobly and proudly, and Harutora slumped on the desk, the corners of his mouth drooping.

On the other side, Touji was sitting on the table, deep in thought.

"......Could it be that we did something to offend her?"

"I don't know, I don't even have a single clue."

"When you called her Kurahashi Kyouko just now, could it be 'that' Kurahashi? In that case, maybe it's related to that aspect."

"She is indeed from that family, but even so, I don't understand why. My father has met with their family, but I have almost never come in contact with the Kurahashi family."

Natsume replied, showing an embarrassed expression. Harutora suddenly raised his head upon hearing the name 'Kurahashi' again.

"Oh yeah, sensei just mentioned it early, so is that Kur. .. Wait, Natsume, Touji, aren't you too familiar? Wasn't yesterday your first meeting?"

Harutora asked confusedly, and Natsume's body visibly trembled upon hearing this.

Harutora and Touji had been in the same high school, and the two of them had had a good relationship before since Harutora's father treated Touji. But Touji had seen Natsume for the first time when he had come to Tokyo with Harutora yesterday. At that time, Harutora had even said Natsume was actually a girl - after all, he had often mentioned the girl he had played with during his childhood to Touji before he knew about the main family tradition. But the two of them hadn't said anything to each other more than a simple greeting.

But, never mind Touji, why was the normally shy Natsume now chatting this energetically with him?

"Uh, this, well....."

Natsume's delicate face went rigid and her words became broken, her gaze wandering around.

In comparison, Touji seemed unruffled.

"Didn't you know, Harutora? People just can't help but come talk to me, I'm such a charming guy."

"......To think you would proudly say that kind of thing after being a juvenile delinquent before."

Harutora raised his head from where he lay on the desk, frowning in wonder. Touji smiled and put his hand on Harutora's head, messing up his hair.

"Alright, don't concern yourself with it. For some reason, I feel like it's not my first time meeting this person, it's definitely because we're very chummy. Right, Natsume?"

"Yes, right! That's it, Harutora. We're chummy! And the cat I had before was named Touji, so I feel especially close to him and I don't think Touji is an outsider at all!"

Touji showed a fake smile, but Natsume forced herself to laugh out loud. Harutora felt that there was some kind

of comedy playing out before him, and his frown got deeper and deeper.

But, Natsume and Touji indeed could not have known each other before, so he could only believe their claims. More importantly, he had secretly worried before that 'I fear that these two people's personalities won't mix well', but in contrast he saw this situation instead..... He felt relieved upon seeing that these two were suddenly in such harmony.

"Could you be jealous?"

"Hey you..."

"You and Natsume were estranged for a long time, but we became this friendly in an instant, so for you to be jealous wouldn't be--"

".....Alright, I know. Honestly, I'd be troubled if you were to fight."

Hearing Touji's mischievous questions, Harutora could only unwillingly give up on his investigation.

Harutora was bound to become even more exhausted the moment the two of them fought, so he could only hope that there wouldn't be any such crisis in the future.

Then, he turned to Natsume, as if giving his stamp of approval: "So, I guess that's how things are. Natsume, you can have faith in Touji. If you need something, you can find him to talk, not just me."

"....." But, Natsume didn't respond for a while.

Harutora who had originally planned on lying back down went "Nn?", turning his body to look at Natsume. He noticed that Natsume was standing still with her eyes wide, her cheeks tinged slightly red.

".....What is it, Natsume?"

"Uh, nothing....."

"Yeah? Could it be that you don't have faith in Touji?"

"Th, That's not it..... It's just, well..... Y, You don't have to worry..... okay? Touji and I aren't that friendly....."

Her attitude was bashful and she didn't speak clearly. Harutora couldn't help but frown.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I, I mean, I trust Touji, but..... The most..... well..... the person c-closest to me is Harutora, I promise....."

She whispered softly without even looking at Harutora, Harutora didn't get the meaning in her words and turned around looking to Touji for help, but Touji was staring at the ceiling for some reason. Harutora, whose look was as stunned as before, felt as if he were watching a slapstick comedy.

"A, Anyways!"

Natsume frantically changed the topic.

"Everything will go smoothly between me, Touji, and Harutora! So - you don't need to concern yourselves with other students, even that girl. As long as you work hard and seriously, I believe that she won't say more. If she dares to find you to make more trouble, I won't let her off ."

After calling out with a red face, Natsume suddenly regained her seriousness, and then said:

"First and foremost - we came to the Onmyou Academy to be able to work independently as soon as possible, and only for that goal."

"Natsume....."

Those words revealed the lifestyle Natsume had in the Onmyou Academy, and Harutora inadvertently sat up straight upon hearing that.

On that note, Natsume had also mentioned before that she didn't have to fear being looked down upon as long as she showed her power in the Onmyou Academy.

That way of saying things was equivalent to directly expressing that she wasn't concerned about the other students, and admitted that she was isolated from the class, with no friends. That proved Harutora's predictions and worries.

...But, Natsume.

That wasn't a good thing. Natsume's circumstances were complex and difficult to understand, but he still didn't believe closing herself out was the correct way.

Just as Harutora was hesitating over whether he should speak his concerns..... "Tsuchimikado-kun - Ah, I'm looking for Natsume-kun." A student spoke from the front.

It was a glasses-wearing male student. Harutora and the others turned around at the same time, making him freeze for a second.

"Uh - that person's here."

He pointed to the classroom door as he said that.

A suit-wearing young man stood in the corridor outside the classroom. His body was tall and thin, and his appearance was quite handsome. He smiled leisurely upon noticing that Harutora and the others were looking at him, lightly nodding his head in greeting.

Harutora was just feeling confused, when - "Oh no! I forgot. Sorry Harutora, I have to go." Natsume exclaimed .

"What is it? What happened?"

"Uh..... I, I'm taking a special class right now, so I also have class during noon break..... Do you know where the student cafeteria is?"

"Yeah, I should."

"Then you two can go eat lunch, I'll probably only return right before afternoon classes start."

She hurried down the stairs after saying this, rushing towards the classroom door.

But, she suddenly stopped halfway, quickly returning to them and leaning forward over the table.

Then--

"Harutora, Touji, let's do our best."

"...Ah, okay."

"Yeah."

Harutora and Touji responded separately to those clear eyes and direct gaze.

Natsume happily laughed like a child, turning around almost as if she were dancing and finally leaving the classroom. She spoke a few words to the man waiting for her in the corridor and immediately disappeared.

After Natsume suddenly left, Harutora's whole body relaxed, but Touji said wryly: "She's really excited."

"Excited..... huh?"

Harutora gazed at the corridor that Natsume had left from with a complex look.

".....Maybe because she's wearing a male uniform, her personality changed. How should I say it..... she feels more childish."

"Oh."

"But, what's strange is that it doesn't feel unexpected at all, but rather it feels like I'm used to it already....."

"Oh, no wonder."

Touji spoke quietly with a grin upon hearing Harutora's mumbling, his look clearly indicating 'so these two are the same after all'.

"But..... Is that guy who came to get Natsume also a teacher here?"

"Do you want to know?

"Kind of....."

"Maybe he's the boyfriend she met here."

"W, What stupid things are you saying, Natsume's pretending to be a guy here."

"So what?"

"Hey, what do you mean!"

In the end, Harutora was from a rural area, and when Touji who had grown up in Tokyo said this, he almost believed 'that kind of thing' wasn't unusual in this place. His good friend good-naturedly smiled upon seeing Harutora's panicked appearance.

"In any case, Natsume left at a perfect time. I have the opportunity to start some secret reconnaissance after showing strength - wait here for me."

When Harutora asked about it, Touji had already stuck his hands in his pockets, leisurely striding away.

Then - "Yo, thanks for earlier." He spoke friendlily to one of the students who had stayed behind in the classroom, the male student who had just told Natsume that someone was here for her.

He seemed to be in the group that brought their own bentoes to school, and he was sitting in his seat, just about to open his bento box when Touji came over. His eyes widened in surprise when the transfer student - and already the center of attention - called out to him without warning.

"Do you remember my name? I'm Ato Touji, nice to meet you. How about you?"

"Ah, yes, I'm Momoe, Momoe Tenma..."

"Tenma, what a memorable name. You can call me Touji."

"Ah, okay, then....."

He could see even from afar that the student Tenma was quite tense. He made sure to be polite when talking, even though Touji was acting close.

His body was quite small and slim, with a conservative, generic hairstyle. His glasses-wearing face showed a middle-school immaturity, and at first glance he looked like a childish youth, but he also seemed affable because of this.

...So this is the reconnaissance he was talking about.....

Touji seemed to be planning on taking advantage of Natsume's absence to hear some information from the students. However, to the eyes of Harutora who watched from afar, it seemed like a juvenile delinquent bullying an errand boy.

Touji later brought up three reasons as to why he had chosen Tenma as the object of his information gathering.

First, Tenma had been willing to tell Natsume there was someone looking for her, showing that he didn't

hold any particular malice towards Natsume, and also proving that he was someone who would honestly do things that someone requested of him.

Second, he was just about to open his bento, or in other words he didn't have any suitable reason to leave, so it would be hard for him to escape.

Third, he looked very 'easy to trick'.

Though Harutora felt dumbfounded upon hearing that , Touji had already been observing the reactions of all the classroom's students when Natsume and Kyouko had fought during the self-introductions, locking on the candidates to grill for information.

"Are you about to eat lunch? Can I bother you for a second?"

Touji had first anticipated Tenma's response - actually, he asked in a strange manner. He said he didn't want to bother him, but he smiled naturally at the empty seat next to Tenma.

As Touji expected, Tenma really did show a good-natured smile, replying: "Sure."

"Great. I just came here so I'm not familiar with this place at all, can I ask you a few things?"

"I, I see. Go ahead, if you don't mind."

"Thanks a bunch. Ah, don't worry about me, keep eating."

What was scary about Touji was that he had clearly been a juvenile delinquent in the past but his manners were so slick. Actually, when they had been in the first year of high school, Harutora had seen many girls become deceived by the disparity between his grim outer appearance and gentle attitude.

"The Onmyou Academy is really an incredible place, not only are the facilities new, there were even a pair of komainu by the door."

"You mean Alpha and Omega, huh. After you get used to them, those two shikigami are pretty interesting."

"Shikigami, huh. Of course, I don't know how to use shikigami, but can you already use them?"

"Uh, I, I can more or less use manmade shikigami..... In the end the current control interfaces for shikigami are quite excellent."

Tenma was a bit tense, but he still chatted with Touji. Even if Touji had bothered his meal, he didn't scowl, so his personality seemed as kind as his appearance.

Touji quietly motioned to Harutora while he was chatting with Tenma, probably to explain 'we can get close to this person'. Harutora stood up reluctantly, walked toward Touji and Tenma's seat.

"Can I join in?"

"Huh, ah--"

"Hey, you don't need to be that scared. I don't know how Natsume is, but we're harmless. Since there are two Tsuchimikado in the class, you can call me Harutora."

Harutora didn't expect that he would frighten Tenma more than Touji had. He endured that light blow, circling around to the seat in front of Tenma and sitting down.

"This guy's also pretty troubled. He's a Tsuchimikado all right, but he's from a branch family and he doesn't know anything about Onmyoudou. And he and I were both studying at a normal high school until this summer. The reason we were able to enter the Onmyou Academy isn't actually that incredible. Do you know about the big Onmyouji commotion a while ago? Actually, we were dragged into it at the time." Touji spoke with a grin to the stiff Tenma.

"Hey, Touji."

Harutora hurriedly interrupted, but Touji replied carelessly: "It's alright."

"Honestly, the Onmyouji who caused that incident was related to some higher-ups in the Onmyou Agency, that part wasn't even released to the media, and us two normal people ended up becoming involved with the ' industry' - that's what happened."

"You mean that incident? So that's the story."

Tenma showed shock. It seemed that he had also heard about that summer incident, since it had become national news.

Touji nodded his head solemnly, continuing to say:

"The name Tsuchimikado somehow got out, and he resolved to endure the pressure he was getting from others - but he didn't expect the public criticism he suffered just now, so he was dispirited for the whole morning."

His words sounded disparaging, but he nudged his chin affectionately in Harutora's direction. That remark wasn't false at all, but his rhetoric was quite clever.

Tenma's eyes widened in surprise upon hearing the whole explanation. "So it's like that." He accepted Touji's words. Even some sympathy emerged in the gaze looking at Harutora. Harutora was grateful, but he felt like Touji was stretching things a bit, so he couldn't help but be a bit hesitant.

Touji shrugged his shoulders.

"But I guess it was what we wanted, and I decided to become an Onmyouji because of it, but..... Just like Touji said, I'm indeed a bit troubled."

"I see, that's really unfortunate."

Tenma showed a cordial smile as he spoke. He had a cute face, and Harutora finally had the feeling of chatting with a 'classmate'.

".....So, we wanted to ask a little about the 'classroom situation', it's fine to respond with whatever you know - That female student from the morning, she was called ' Kurahashi' if I remember correctly?"

Touji leaned forward as if to speak directly into the student's ear and cut to the chase, perhaps believing the opportunity to be just right. Tenma whispered an "Ah", quickly understanding the meaning in Touji's words.

"Right, she's the princess of the Kurahashi family. But she's not such a stuck-up girl, she even speaks to me with an open attitude."

".....But she was pretty barbed today."

"Yeah, she gets like that once Natsume-kun gets involved..... It seems like she made him a rival."

Tenma's gentle smile became slightly bitter. It seemed that Kyouko's reaction in the morning didn't represent the general opinion of the class, but was just a personal grudge.

However, that wasn't what Harutora was concerned about.

"Ah, right, speaking of 'Kurahashi', I wanted to ask just now, what's significant about the Kurahashi family? Are they famous?"

Upon hearing that question, Tenma showed the same reaction as Ohtomo before, his eyes widening tremendously.

"You see, he's really not familiar with this industry."

Touji hurriedly came forth, only now opening his mouth to explain to Harutora:

"The Kurahashi family is the same as the Tsuchimikado family, they're famous families of Onmyoudou. The Kurahashi family is the top name since the decline of the Tsuchimikado. You heard the principal's name, right? Kurahashi Miyo, that old granny is the head of the Kurahashi family."

"Famous? So that's why sensei said she was a ' behind-the-scenes figure', huh..... Th, Then Kyouko too?"

"Yeah, she's also from the Kurahashi family, and not only that, she's also the granddaughter of principal Kurahashi. Moreover, the current head of the Onmyou Agency is the principal's son, so also her father."

Tenma's supplemental explanation stunned Harutora.

"That's so overwhelming! My dad's just a rural Onmyou doctor, and Natsume's dad..... I forgot what he was doing, but he's definitely not some important government official. That's crazy! What a ridiculous family!"

"Didn't I say so?"

Touji replied coldly to the surprised Harutora.

"But regardless of the current powers, the Tsuchimikado family holds the history and the pedigree, and that's why Kurahashi-san is so one-sidedly hostile to Natsume-kun - That's probably what everyone believes, but doesn't say." Tenma smiled lightly.

"One-sidedly?"

"That..... you can tell just by looking."

Tenma spoke apologetically. Anyone would believe this upon seeing Natsume's cold demeanor compared to Kyouko's angry reaction.

"But it's no wonder she cares this much, since after all they're the two best students in the class."

".....Could it be that Kyouko is the same as Natsume, and had basic Onmyoudou training ever since she was small?"

"It wouldn't be strange if she did receive that training, since she's the princess of the Kurahashi family."

Maybe Kyouko was a powerful Onmyouji. Harutora silently alerted himself that even if he were challenged, he definitely couldn't get angry and rush to accept.

"But the first-year classes are focused on lectures, so no one is actually sure about their power, it's just that the two of them perform perfectly during the rarely-held practical training, and it seems like they're the only ones in this year that have defensive-type shikigami."

Tenma explained.

"What does defensive-type mean?" Harutora's question surprised Tenma again - "Shut up for now." Touji covered his mouth from the side. Seeing the pair of them acting completely impolitely, Tenma laughed, obviously relaxing quite a bit.

"But I was really surprised this morning, and I'm not the only one. Other people were probably also surprised. "

"Why? Weren't they originally like oil and water?"

"Yeah, Kurahashi-san actively provokes Natsume-kun, but Natsume-kun rarely retaliates that fiercely, it's really not like him....."

Upon saying this, Tenma realized that the two of them were close to Natsume and cast out a questioning look. Touji noticed and told him to "Don't worry, speak freely." He once again showed an apologetic look, continuing to say:

"He - Natsume-kun is normally very calm, and it might not be good to say this, but he seems uncaring about the things around him, and he always gives everyone an impression of listening silently. So when he

was like that in front of everyone - how should I say it? It was really unexpected for him to quarrel so passionately with someone. Kurahashi-san was so angry in the morning because Natsume-kun's reaction scared her."

Tenma spoke of his feelings sincerely, and Harutora and Touji unconsciously looked at each other as they listened. From Natsume's naive demeanor just now, it was really hard to imagine the 'usual Natsume' that Tenma spoke of.

But--

.....Thinking carefully, that was indeed closer to her disposition.

Harutora had said himself that Natsume dressed as a male seemed more childish, but the Natsume from before - the main family girl that Harutora had been close to since he was small - gave people the same feeling as Tenma described. She carried the heavy burden of being the heir to the Tsuchimikado family, and wanted wholeheartedly to become an exceptional Onmyouji without paying heed to anything else. She was proud and strict with others, that kind of girl.

Of course, her personality couldn't flip even if she were dressed as a male, and she had been this agitated and excited today because--

"You're very important to Natsume-kun."

"....."

Tenma's gaze held no other meaning, and Harutora turned away to conceal his embarrassment.

Natsume had put forth effort to defend him, but she absolutely had not considered what effects that vigor would have on the surroundings.

Harutora only wanted to settle down in the Onmyou Academy as smoothly as possible, for both himself and Natsume. Because maybe even Natsume had to show a willingness to get close to her classmates other than him and Touji.

".....Don't worry about it, 'let's do our best'."

Harutora was speechless, and Touji spoke as if seeing through his thoughts. Harutora nodded his head heavily in front of the wondering Tenma.

Part 2

"This is practically an insult! You Bakatora, this is too shameful!"

Natsume roared her complaints.

However, Harutora, who was lying on the desk, had long since lost the energy to respond, with invisible black smoke flowing out of his head. Touji sitting next to him didn't come to his rescue, watching from afar instead.

"I always thought you were an idiot, but I didn't think you would be so dumb you didn't know anything! It's a wonder you even got into the Onmyou Academy! Even if I'm not Kurahashi Kyouko, I still doubt whether you sneaked in through the back door!"

"Don't keep calling me idiot idiot, I just don't know.....
"

"That's why I'm saying you're an idiot! You're aiming to become an Onmyouji but somehow you don't even know the types of shikigami, that just proves that you're a genuine, huge idiot!"

The afternoon class had come to an end, and it was time for class to let out.

The reason Natsume was this angry was the afternoon class. Actually, nothing peculiar had happened, just an inevitable outcome.

Simply put, it finally came to light that Harutora had absolutely no knowledge about anything related to Onmyoudou.

"What types of General-style shikigami are there? What's the difference between the Rikujin-shikisen and the General-style Rikujin? What relationship is there between the scale of a spiritual disaster and the danger level?"

"......Uh, well....."

"What 'uh, well'! What in the world were you doing before!"

She yelled hysterically, not even hearing Harutora's " Studying in a normal high school.....'

The teachers responsible for the class had originally thought Harutora was joking around, deliberately answering incorrectly. In the end, he was still a Tsuchimikado even if he was a new student, so some of the teachers even thought Harutora had been angry.

But, they gradually frowned and became stunned, finally choosing to ignore the existence of Harutora. All of the teachers who came in the afternoon showed similar reactions, and Natsume's face became paler and paler until she finally stared fiercely at Harutora with her face flushed in utter shame.

"He crammed before entering, so he forgot it all after the test."

Harutora laid on the table, and stared resentfully at Touji after hearing him speak indifferently and mercilessly. "Also--" Touji didn't back down, continuing to say:

"'General Onmyoudou' divides shikigami into two types. One includes deities, spirits, and beasts - these

kinds of traditional spirits that exist as shikigami are called servant shikigami, but now most modern shikigami are now made by infusing magical power into a manmade vessel. In addition, manmade shikigami are divided into simple manmades which were created purely by the practitioner's magical power, and standard manmades which can hold external magical power. Simple manmades must be directly controlled or issued orders beforehand, but standard manmades can act autonomously to some degree, and in particular there is also a type of high-level manmade which can think on its own and can be said to have an independent personality. "

"......Why is a normal kid from an ordinary family like you so knowledgeable....."

"Because I'm not an idiot."

"Th, Then what do defensive shikigami, general or domestic shikigami mean?"

"Those are methods of creation or usages, and there's no such thing as a domestic shikigami."

But, other than Touji, the other students who had viewed him as a 'new student from the Tsuchimikado'

were all extremely surprised at his showing himself as an amateur. They were the same as the lecturers, first surprised, then doubting whether he was serious, and then more and more astonished, greatly disappointed, and then finally so stunned they weren't even able to laugh or get angry. Even Tenma was amazed, and it really hit Harutora hard.

But needless to say, Kurahashi Kyouko was the one who changed the class atmosphere the most. A ridiculing and contemptuous gaze naturally shot out to the master of the shikigami, and Natsume shrank her body in humiliation, lowering her head.

"This is the biggest shame I've experienced in my life....."

She mumbled painfully, her face livid and her shoulders trembling. Her tone was quite grim, and the tense atmosphere she gave off had no trace of a relaxed ' hahaha, this is way too much'.

"A crash course..... You have to take a crash course, and it has to be a focused crash course from hell! You have to take back the half year, no, the sixteen years of your life that you're behind. First are 'Introduction to

General Onmyoudou' and all the reference books relating to 'Onmyoudou Second Level', and 'Modern Shikigami Theory', 'Extended History of Yin and Yang'..... There's also classics, you have to read the 'Kinugyokuto Works', every volume of 'Arts of Divination', and also the very basic 'Cycles of Change', 'Principles of the Five Elements', 'Essays in New Onmyouji', and several of the 'Imperial Directive'....."[3]

Natsume rambled on, and it sounded like an incantation to Harutora's ears, and even an incantation with 'evil' or 'dark' attributes.

".....Harutora, you live in the dorm, right?"

"Uh, yes."

"Then we'll begin your crash course in the dorms."

"Uh, but it's a male dorm....."

"I'm also a 'male student'."

"Uh, but....."

"You don't need to worry, I know a magic that will let you stay awake even through the night, and it can last for a whole week if you ignore the side effects."

She looked seriously at Harutora, her eyes flashing with a dangerous madness without any intention of joking. Even the exhausted Harutora unconsciously froze , his body stiffening.

But just then.....

"...Natsume, the guy from noon came again." Touji's words were like a bucket of cold water.

The suit-wearing guy who had appeared during the noon break was waving his hand at them from the corridor outside the classroom. Natsume made a sound of surprise, her tone returning to normal.

"Oh no, I forgot about after class....."

"I, I see, it's really unfortunate, but we'll have to postpone that crash course--"

Harutora was planning on proposing that they forget about the matter, but Natsume suddenly stared at him, making him shut up like his mouth had been sewn shut.

Natsume took out a notepad, scribbling down the names of books with a mechanical pencil.

"...Here. The library should have all of these books, so go borrow them for now."

After writing that, she tore off the sheet and gave it to Harutora, herself hurriedly putting away her things.

"I'll return to the dorm later, so go read through those books first. No, you have to finish them, that's an order!"

After resolutely stating those words, Natsume rushed out of the room, her figure disappearing into the corridor with the man. The shikigami who had been left behind didn't even have the chance to say a word of opposition.

He looked down at the paper. All over the column of literature and reference books were words that he had never seen before, so it seemed that he would have to start by learning how to pronounce these words.

"Great, Harutora, Natsume-sensei seems very motivated."

"Touji, you couldn't have read all of these books before , right?"

"Unfortunately, because of physical problems, I get anemic once I read anything from before the Heisei era."[4]

His good friend's frivolous tone finally made Harutora relax his shoulders, sighing.

Speaking of grades, Harutora had originally been the preeminent king of failing, and in his previous high

school he had often had to take remedial classes. No wonder he would encounter setbacks upon entering the academy and suddenly being expected to study a specific field like Onmyoudou.

"Have all the students here read and memorized these books?"

"The students who passed the Onmyou Academy exam to enter should more or less have read them."

"Are all the classes from now on going to be like that?"

"Didn't Tenma say, the first-year classes are centered around lectures."

Harutora collapsed back onto the table, and Touji looked into the distance while stroking his chin. The pupils of their eyes were hazy, and they had long since lost the energy to get angry.

"I feel like I'm barely hanging on....."

"The classes here are more tiring than I imagined."

"Is there any magic to improve the brain?"

"What kind of idiotic magic is that."

They opened their heavy eyes, talking about foolish topics. After speaking, the two of them went silent, looking at a daze towards the podium in the front.

The students all seemed too busy to talk, and only the two of them were left in the classroom.

Not long after, Harutora started leisurely folding the paper.

He folded it into two sides, making a paper airplane. Then, he lightly swung his arm. He and Touji silently watched the paper airplane leave his hand and slowly fly through the classroom, hit the blackboard, and fall a short distance onto the podium.

"......I'm so hungry."

"I'm hungry too."

"......Let's go."

"Okay."

Harutora had predicted correctly. Sure enough, the future would be difficult.

The Onmyou Academy had specifically prepared a student dorm to let students from around the nation gather here to live.

The dorm was split into male and female dorms, and the former was located a ten minute walk away from the academy. It was different from the newly constructed academy building, and even Harutora and Touji's ages added together were far less than the history of this dorm.

The dorm's outer wall was constructed of red brick. After they passed through the entrance, on one side was an eating area and lounge, and straight ahead was the modified shower and bathing area. Harutora had been assigned the second room on the second floor, and Touji was one room down.

There was still some time until dinner.

Harutora walked up the second floor with heavy steps, parting with Touji in the corridor.

The dorm room was six tatami mats large, and the tatami mats left by the previous student were still in Harutora's room, having never been switched.

After returning to his room, Harutora sighed deeply with a "Haaah.....", rolling around on the floor without taking off his uniform.

He had arrived to the dorm yesterday evening and had first organized his luggage, but the only thing in his luggage other than the change of clothes stuffed in his bag was bedding. In addition, the only furniture in the room was a folding table, so it didn't look lived-in at all.

The empty room was just like the present Harutora - the Harutora who wanted to become an Onmyouji.

"I'm exhausted....."

He looked blankly up at the ceiling as he muttered. The ceiling was completely different from the one at home, and his environment had indeed changed.

...I'm really in Tokyo.....

The first time he had come to Tokyo it was his first time living alone even though it was a dorm.

Unfortunately, the exhilarating feeling of liberation from yesterday evening had disappeared after only a day.

"I'm just too useless....."

The teachers' stunned faces weren't much. Their attitudes afterwards as if Harutora didn't exist had been the hardest to bear. In addition, he hadn't profoundly felt the cold gazes and knowing smiles from the unfamiliar classmates during class, and he had only recognized how much that blow exceeded his imagination after he had left the academy and was on his own.

...He felt like he was being left out.

But, this situation was much better compared to the situation that Touji had predicted at the start. So far, Kurahashi Kyouko was the only one caught up over Harutora being a Tsuchimikado, so this had nothing much to do with the feeling of distress and alienation that plagued Harutora.

The problem was with Harutora himself.

"Damn....."

He had studied once before the entrance exam for the Onmyou Academy - he believed it counted as serious. But he only realized now when he was truly here how naive his thoughts back then had been. He had studied at best for half a year, and he feared that the 'sixteen wasted years of his life' that Natsume had spoken of was not an exaggeration.

Even so...

...'That's an order!'

"......Tch."

He couldn't help but click his tongue.

"I came here as a dropout....."

It had been his own decision to transfer, so he couldn't expect to be treated specially.

But... the thought 'I came here especially for you' refused to leave his head. He had given up on his past life to come to Natsume's side; however, she had only been happy at the start, and upon noticing Harutora's ignorance - actually, she should have had suspicions long

ago - she had immediately betrayed him, crying 'this is the biggest shame I've experienced in my life.' What kind of a joke was that, he was the one who got shamed, Natsume was just feeling embarrassed by herself.

"Come to think about it, could that girl be treating her shikigami like a pet she raised?"

He had never come in contact with the Onmyouji world in his life, so naturally he was amazingly ignorant. She should have wanted to console him upon seeing her childhood friend this pained, reassuring him by showing with a tender voice and gaze... Don't worry, Harutora, I'm here.....

"Impossible....."

He tried to imagine it, but he couldn't put together that scene no matter how he tried. If Natsume were that cute of a girl, he wouldn't have let himself become distant from her during middle school.

As he thought and thought, the face of a dead friend suddenly emerged in his mind.

".....Hokuto."

He recalled the happy times when he, Touji, and Hokuto had fun together. Even now, his heart hurt once he thought that those times would never return.

No, though the shikigami who was a girl on the outside - Hokuto - had disappeared, the practitioner who controlled her should still be somewhere in the world, and it wasn't impossible to regain those nostalgic times. Maybe he could see the true Hokuto - the person who had controlled Hokuto, and one of the reasons that Harutora had stepped into this world.

He wanted to see Hokuto.

He wanted to see her and talk freely with her some day. What would Hokuto think if she knew that he had entered the Onmyou Academy and was suffering there? Would she be happy for him, or encourage him?

Maybe she would also be stunned at his uselessness, but even if she were stunned, she would still laugh and tell him to cheer up afterwards. She had a sharp tongue, but she definitely wasn't the same as Natsume who thought that such performance reflected on her own self.

"Ah, Hokuto told me long ago that I should ask my dad about Onmyoudou basics."

Harutora twisted his body on the floor while muttering.

Then, he suddenly rose.

"Right....."

He recalled that his father had given him a farewell gift before he left home.

It was a shikigami - that is, a shikigami talisman.

He hastily rushed over to his athletic bag stuffed full of clothes.

"I forgot because I was too busy yesterday.....!"

Since your goal is to become an Onmyouji, you are a member of the 'Tsuchimikado'.

His father had said this back then and given the talisman to Harutora as he was about to leave home. He remembered that this was the first time his father had mentioned the name 'Tsuchimikado' to him.

Harutora didn't even know what kind of shikigami this was, and he hadn't even thought about asking to clarify. But, his father had given him this shikigami while specially mentioning the name 'Tsuchimikado', so even if he didn't expect a tremendous servant shikigami like Natsume's dragon Hokuto, he still couldn't help but expect a shikigami that was perhaps useful and prestigious like that white horse Yukikaze. In addition, since the main family had a dragon, the branch family was naturally a tiger. It could even be a strong one to make the teachers and students admire him, a fearful, extraordinarily strong shikigami.....

"Found it!'

He took out a paper envelope the size of a playing card. The paper was thin, like a protection charm a shrine would sell, and the back was sealed with wax, with the word 'Tsuchimikado' written on the front in ink along with the pentagram family mark. Inside was placed a shikigami charm - the charm that the shikigami used as a vessel. But...

".....Crap, how do I use this?" He had used healing charms and had also used protection charms reflexively

in the incidents before. Outside of charms, he had also once used - though he had just swung it around randomly - the strong 'Protection Sword'.

But, this was his first time touching a shikigami charm.

Maybe Natsume would know how to use it, but after encountering that attitude, he wanted to surprise Natsume if he could.

".....Could this have an instructions manual?"

Hoping weakly, Harutora planned on opening the seal on the back.

That moment, a tingle abruptly ran through the pentagram on his cheek.

Part 3

More accurately, it was a feeling of aura.

And it was right behind him.

Harutora reflexively turned around, noticing a small child kneeling on the ground, both hands placed on the floor as she leaned forward.

"What?"

He couldn't help but doubt his own eyes.

He couldn't clearly see her face because her head was lowered, but he could see a neatly combed - though there were two protrusions on the sides of her head - small head. The child wore clothing similar to the Onmyou Academy uniform, but it was more like the original style of the uniform - Heian-era imperial clothing with a hakama on her lower half. The clothes were clearly loose, and her body type looked like an elementary schooler's, no, maybe even younger.

"....."

He was speechless for a while at this sudden event.

When had this child entered the room? Harutora wondered in some corner of his mind, but another corner calmly thought that he couldn't have failed to notice if someone entered such a small room. In the end, he had

no idea where this child had come from, why she was in his room, or why she was prostrated before him.

"Uh, hey....."

Harutora carefully opened his mouth.

Just as he had spoken, the child's back suddenly trembled as if she had been splashed with hot water. Harutora couldn't help but tremble as well, swallowing the words that he hadn't said.

However, just then, something else caught Harutora's eyes. When the child had trembled, it seemed like something had swished around behind her prostrated body - in other words, near her rear. When he noticed that thing, Harutora's eyes widened in surprise.

It was a tail.

It was a tail draped with soft, straight hair, a leaf-shaped fluffy tail. Harutora almost jumped from surprise, moving his gaze back to the child's head. Those things on her head hadn't been natural hair formations, but the lightly trembling things on the child's head were flaps of fur similar to her tail, triangle-shaped pointed ears.

"You, your ears..... and your tail.....!"

The moment Harutora opened his mouth in shock--

The child raised her lowered head.

It was a little girl.

The girl had a head of neat bangs, her skin as white as if it had been powdered. Her looks showed a youthfulness matching her age, and she looked like a living doll, with even her fine details seeming quite refined.

The thing that impressed upon him the deepest were the clear eyes that stared at him.

Her eyes gave off a blue light.

The girl's round eyes were blue, beautiful like glass, deep as the sky, and made Harutora gaze in amazement, causing him to completely forget about the many questions he had about the girl.

A moment after the two of them stared at each other.

Suddenly--

Pearl teardrops dropped from the girl's blue eyes, and only then did Harutora come to his sense, panicking for a moment.

"What! Hey! Why are you suddenly crying! Come to think of it, who are you? .....Ahh whatever, it doesn't matter who you are, please don't cry!"

Harutora reached out his arms but didn't dare to touch the girl's body, only able to wave them helter-skelter in midair. The girl looked at Harutora's frantic appearance without blinking, her teary eyes widening.

Not long after, the girl chewed her lip, quickly wiping away her tears with her sleeve. Then, she lowered her head again, raising her voice:

"A p-p-p, pleasure to make your acquaintance--"

Even though she was raising her voice, she was just mustering her strength to let out her originally very weak voice. That voice was just as childish as her outer appearance, and Harutora's brain was simply blank.

".....Huh? W, What did you say? What's going on?"

"M-M-M, My name is Kon, a descendant of the ancestral fox Kuzunoha, r-r-retainer of Tsuchimikado Harutora-sama as so assigned, i-i-if it pleases you--"

She kowtowed on the floor as she said this. Of course, Harutora was already too stunned to speak.

...W, What did she say? Ancestral fox? Descendant? Pleases you..... What was supposed to please him?

'Speechless' referred perfectly to this kind of situation. Harutora's mind was in chaos, his thoughts were spinning around wildly, and in the end he returned again to the visual shock.

In other words, those ears and tail.

They weren't accessories, since they could move, and they also looked quite real. More importantly, a girl's body couldn't have real ears or a tail.

She wasn't a human girl.

In other words, she was.....

"Ah! Sh, Shikigami! Could you be a shikigami?"

As Harutora confirmed, the girl - Kon - quickly nodded forcefully.

At that point, Harutora finally got it. She was a shikigami, a shikigami that looked like a small child, so then.....

"Could it be - this is it? This talisman..... The shikigami my dad gave me is.....!"

Kon nodded again, an extremely cautions look emerging on her delicate face.

"B, But, I didn't do anything? How did you suddenly come out?"

"A, As I am a retainer, I must guard my master at all times. I h-heard your summons as I was guarding you from the shadows--"

Harutora asked blankly, and Kon explained in a tiny voice as her limbs trembled from surprise.

"Huh? Y, You mean, you've been beside me since my dad gave me that talisman? But you weren't there! I didn't see you at all!"

"A, As my master did not call for me, I hid myself nearby."

"Hid? You hid yourself? You were always there, though I couldn't see you?"

"Y, Yes."

Harutora confirmed a third time, and Kon just bowed her head, flattening her fluffy tail.

She seemed tense and extremely frightened, and Harutora recovered some of his calm upon noting her abnormal stiffness.

"I see..... I, I understand. Anyway, first raise your head , you're prostrating so much I don't know what to do, and it's hard to talk."

Kon immediately raised her head once Harutora said this. That childhood face was still tensed, and her caution had not changed, and her ears would occasionally twitch like she couldn't hold back her tension.

".....Come to think of it, Alpha also said some strange words in the morning like my familiar had been registered..... So he was referring to you."

Harutora sat cross-legged across from Kon, sizing up the shikigami in front of him again. Kon became even tenser under her master's gaze, shrinking back her sitting body and looking back at Harutora, her hands still placed on the floor.

Ignoring the ears and tail for now, Kon seemed like an ordinary girl, but she indeed seemed more mature than girls - actually, probably children? - of a similar age. Otherwise, she was no different from a true human. Her features were a bit too perfect, but her straight-looking eyes, the soft contours of her face, and her small lips were all clearly 'ordinary', just like an 'ordinary' cute child.

...She was a shikigami? Such a small child was somehow a shikigami?'

If Natsume was here, maybe she would explain altogether that the shikigami was accustomed to appearing with the form of a 'child', but Harutora who didn't know such things really didn't know what kind of attitude to take towards a reverent and respectful small girl.

".....Dad gave you to me?"

Kon strongly nodded her head.

"I, I have also served generations of the Tsuchimikado branch family in the past--" Maybe noticing that simply nodding didn't resolve the confusion in Harutora's heart, she opened her mouth to voice a supplement.

"What? When was that? Could it be my dad?"

"M, My past memories no longer exist, but it was indeed not just one generation of the branch family."

"You mean that you served the branch family for generations? I see."

Just like Yukikaze of the main family - Harutora accepted that explanation. In other words, the branch family had shikigami like Yukikaze who served the family, and his dad had given one of those shikigami to him. In that case, it wasn't strange that his dad had especially brought up the name 'Tsuchimikado'.

"Uh, so you....."

Harutora called out, and Kon instantly cried out in trepidation and hesitation.

"M, Master, please call me by my name directly."

"Master..... I, I understand, then how about you don't call me 'master', it's fine if you call me Harutora."

"H, H-H-H, Ha, Ha, Haru-t-t-tora.....sama!"

".....You don't need to be that nervous."

"....."

"Uh, really! I won't mind at all, I really don't mind, so please don't show that kind of expression!"

Kon's round eyes began getting moist again, and Harutora hastily spoke to appease her.

"Calm down a bit first! Relax! Breathe deeply! Alright? "

Harutora did his best to convince her. Kon straightened her back and opened her small mouth to breathe deeply in accordance with his words. Her nature was very simple, but it was really troublesome to figure out how to deal with her.

...However..... This was also far outside his expectations. He felt that this was more like the relationship between a child and her guardian rather than a shikigami and her master.

At the least, she was far from Harutora's expectations and was not a shikigami that her practitioner could boast about to others. She definitely wouldn't be of much use in battle, and conversely, he might even have to protect her.

But, the biggest problem was still her external appearance. After all, if he brought this little girl around with him everywhere in public, it was very possible that it would give rise to unnecessary mistakes.

...That bastard dad.....

He had originally believed his dad had finally congratulated his son seriously for leaving home, but he was definitely laughing out loud behind his back right now. Harutora had simply been a fool for jumping for joy with expectation.

But, hold on, Kon might not necessarily fail his expectations.

Shikigami couldn't be judged by their appearance, and though a strong exterior was obviously good, actual power was still the most important. It wasn't impossible that a strong shikigami actually hid underneath the exterior of a little girl.

"Okay, how about this. Kon, I want to ask about you first."

Kon quickly regained her serious look as Harutora spoke.

"First is..... Right, what kind of shikigami are you? It's fine to just say your type."

Harutora brought up what he thought to be the most basic question, but all he saw was Kon's confused face and rigid expression as if he had asked her to do something incomprehensible.

"Huh? You don't know what type of shikigami you are ? Right, didn't you say you were a retainer? Could it be that you're a defensive shikigami that Touji just talked about?"

"Yes, I serve as Harutora-sama's retainer."

"Is that right? Uh..... what else did he say? In other words, you're a manmade type?"

"M, Manmade.....?"

Kon's originally cheerful face was instantly covered by shadows. Pears of sweat emerged on her dismal face as if she believed there was no way to reply to that unforgivable sin.

"Huh? You don't know that either? .....Ah, I know, you served generations of branch families, so could you be an ancient shikigami from farther back than the General style? Uh, you don't remember things from before, right? But that should be right."

He remembered that Yukikaze had also been from long ago and had been designated a high-level manmade shikigami by the General style, so it was very possible that Kon was the same type as Yukikaze.

"Whatever, it's no use to continue asking since you don't know, so I'll change to a different topic. What are your special moves? What kind of things can you do?"

"...Yes, I apologize for being dull, but my best move is a stealth technique."

"Oh, a stealth move, let me see it."

"A, As you command....."

Saying this, Kon's figure became fuzzy and vanished in moments. Even though it was his own request, Harutora was still greatly surprised.

"Uwah! you vanished! Amazing, I can't see where you are at all."

He couldn't help but reach out, but his arm passed through the position Kon had been without obstruction. It seemed more like she had instantly moved somewhere else rather than hiding her body.

"Kon? Are you here?'

"Yes."

"Ohh, I heard your voice! Incredible, you didn't just make your body become invisible?"

"Th, Though that can be done, I have currently left my actual body and eliminated my presence."

"L, Left your body? What does that mean? Is it like a ghost?"

"Yes, I am in a spirit form..... and merged with the surrounding aura. H, However, if I speak like this, the aura will inevitably fluctuate....."

As Harutora heard this, he looked towards the direction that the voice came from and saw something like a blur of aura. But he didn't actually see it with his vision, but rather 'saw' the aura with his spirit-seeing abilities.

But, if Kon hadn't spoken, he wouldn't have noticed even with spirit seeing. So it was that kind of stealth - Harutora excitedly nodded.

"Okay, that's good."

Kon instantly reappeared once Harutora spoke. Even though it was right in front of him, she was just 'there as soon as he noticed it' like before, appearing soundlessly and presencelessly.

"Hmm..... It looks pretty amazing, way to go, Kon."

"Th, Th-Th, Thanks for your praise....."

"Don't be humble, that move is really amazing, I really admire it."

"I-I, It's nothing special....."

Kon lowered her face with red-tinged cheeks, her tail constantly waving back and forth. She seemed shy, and that expression was really quite cute.

"What else? Do you have other moves?"

"F, Floating in midair.....!"

"Ooh, beautiful! It's like magic! What else?"

"M, Manipulating fire.....!"

"Uwah, f, fireballs! Hot! Those are real fireballs! Amazing!"

Kon floated about fifty centimeters into the air while continuing to kneel, and a light-blue fist-sized ball of fire appeared above her head. The fireballs increased by two, so that there were a total of three fireballs floating round inside the room. The fireballs looked like wandering souls, but the heat they gave off was genuine.

...Really strong! This shikigami was so amazing!

Even though he had doubted at first, she had stealth, had levitation, and showed moves very suitable of a shikigami, simple yet convenient. The fireballs too - never mind how their strength was - they clearly gave off an intimidating presence, and Harutora was extremely satisfied.

Kon also looked proud upon seeing her master reacting like that, and her tail became even more active as she almost wriggled her body in happiness, unable to hide her excited look.

But...

"Incredible, Kon! What else? Do you have other skills?"

"......Huh? Other....."

Kon's face sank, the floating fireballs vanished in a puff, and Kon herself also dropped with a thunk from midair. "...Huh?" Her face gradually paled in front of the clueless Harutora.

Then, a strange light flashed in her blue eyes as if she had suddenly thought of something.

She rapidly changed her sitting posture, putting one knee forward as her right hand simultaneously reached quickly behind her back. Her movements were sharp and hard to imagine from her demeanor just now. Something was shining - just as Harutora thought this, the wakizashi[5] she clutched with a reverse grip arrived at the tip of his nose.

Harutora gasped in surprise.

"I, I-I-If Harutora-sama orders, I shall not hesitate to sacrifice my life! E, E-Enemies of Harutora-sama shall be made into rust on this beloved blade 'Kachiwari'.....!"

"....."

Her gaze was fierce, and the blade of the wakizashi flashed in front of his eyes, making Harutora's face stiffen.

".....I, I see, thanks, Kon. I got it, I understand already, so please put that thing back....."

Kon gasped in panic and returned the wakizashi behind her back as per Harutora's request. It seemed that the scabbard was inside her belt. After putting it back, she hastily returned to a kneel again.

...This wouldn't do.

"A, Anyway, Kon, that..... K, Kachiwari? That name is pretty scary..... Anyway, don't draw that blade without my permission. Got it? You definitely can't draw it!"

"B, But, Harutora-sama, as your guard, it is my responsibility to ensure your safety, if something unexpected--"

"Even if I encounter something unexpected, you still have to confirm with me first! Got it?"

Harutora snapped back, and Kon finally nodded her head reluctantly.

...A little shikigami doll who would draw a blade without warning, give me a break.....

Though he wasn't sure when this shikigami had been made, it seemed like he needed to quickly correct Kon's

overly old-fashioned manner of speech[6], as there might be some day when it would lead to an unexpected grave situation.

...If this girl got into trouble, all the responsibility would be on him, right? What a joke, I can't deal with this myself.

He felt like his head hurt. It really wasn't a time to plan to use this shikigami to improve his image. Everything was the fault of his own bad luck, Harutora complained in his heart.

Just then - 'I always thought you were an idiot, but I didn't think you would be so dumb you didn't know anything!'

"Ugh.....!"

Natsume's roar suddenly flitted through his mind, and Harutora hurriedly rid himself of his pretentious attitude .

...I, Idiot! How can I have this kind of arrogant attitude !

Right, this child had more reason to complain than him. In the end, he was only an outsider with the empty name Tsuchimikado, and a student whose grades were far behind and unable to keep up with the pace of studies . The shikigami with this kind of master was the one with the downright worst luck.

Kon seemed to believe that Harutora was scolding her, and her head was lowered in silence, with the ears on her head drooping down in depression.

On the other hand, could it be that Kon had this attitude of putting Harutora on a pedestal because she had made some kind of mistake? Maybe she believed that since Harutora was a Tsuchimikado, he was definitely a powerful 'great man'.

"Hey, Kon, in order to avoid any mistakes, let me first make it clear....."

"Uh, uh, yes."

Harutora's tone was serious, and Kon instantly straightened her back upon hearing it.

He coughed awkwardly, clearing his throat.

"L, Listen up Kon, I'll say it flat out, even though I'm a Tsuchimikado, I'm not like the incredible Onmyouji you served before. Honestly, I'm not even confident I can use your power to the fullest....."

As he said that--

Kon's eyes suddenly widened.

A bottomless despair was reflected from her blue eyes.

"Y, y-y-y-y-y-you mean that I am not needed?"

Her eyes brimmed with tears and her small body trembled intensely. "H, Hold on!" Harutora frantically leaned forward.

"No! You're mistaken! I didn't say anything about needing you or not, it has nothing to do with that, that wasn't what I meant..... I wanted you not to think so highly of me."

"...?"

Kon's teary eyes were wide in wonder, seeming as if she hadn't understood the meaning in Harutora's words at all.

"Actually, uh..... I'm still a student - something like an Onmyouji trainee, and my grades are terrible, almost to the level of a complete outsider, and I'm not at all incredible, so you don't actually have to be so respectful to me."

He said so much that even he felt ashamed, but that was the truth, he was helpless.

Kon listened to Harutora's confession with her mouth tightly closed and surprise all over her face. It made him think of the reactions of his teachers and the students from earlier in the day, and he couldn't help but turn his head embarrassedly.

But--

"That's not true."

Kon spoke resolutely.

She spoke smoothly and with a firm confidence in her voice, a reversal from before. However, after Harutora turned back around in surprise, the resolution on her face instantly collapsed and returned to the original flustered appearance.

Even so, she still tried hard to express her thoughts.

"I, I-I was guarding Harutora-sama the whole day today."

"...Ah."

Indeed, that meant that she had seen all of Harutora's idiotic appearance in the Onmyou Academy.

"Th, Then you should know clearly that I don't understand anything, right? Then why....."

"Because I-I am Harutora-sama's shikigami."

"For just that reason? You're so reverent and respectful of me because of that?"

Harutora asked in surprise. Kon showed a confused look and stared at him upon hearing this, as if that were common sense. If her attitude were indeed common sense..... As Natsume's shikigami, Harutora couldn't help but feel despair towards that kind of world.

"A, Am I troubling Harutora-sama?"

"No..... that's not it."

Harutora replied perfunctorily. Actually, he felt that Kon was exalting him too much, so he felt a bit uneasy.

...But.....

Kon's humble words moved Harutora's heart after a whole day of experiencing misery.

Thinking carefully, it would be a true tragedy if even his own shikigami expressed a scornful attitude. Kon's attitude shouldn't be that stiff if they slowly got to know each other. Randomly slashing that wakizashi around was indeed a troublesome problem, but there was no reason to force her to change.

On the other hand, since Kon was definitely obedient to her master, he should do his best to respond to her expectations and become an Onmyouji worthy of her respect.

".....I understand, from today on you'll be my shikigami and I'll be your master, though I'm an unseemly master. Please take care of me, Kon."

Harutora secretly decided, speaking to Kon with a smile.

Kon's cheeks blushed and eyes gleamed for a moment. She lowered her head hastily.

"I, I-I-I am not worthy, please instruct me well--"

Her attitude and gracious words were courteous, and it was just her tail that jumped around like a little kid. Though he felt a little regretful, Harutora was no longer concerned after seeing Kon this happy.

...I have a shikigami now. Harutora digested that fact again.

".....Alright! Then, Kon, you were with me the whole day, so you should be clear on what kind of a person I am, right?"

"H-H-Harutora-sama is broad-minded, even someone like I can see--"

"Slow down, you don't have to rush to respond, I just meant that I was going to continue asking questions, like. ..... Right, is there any special meaning to your ears and tail?"

Harutora hid a wry smile, asking with as gentle a tone as possible. With that question, Kon's ears and tail instantly shook and stood up like they had been shocked.

"M, Meaning..... I am a fox spirit, so therefore....."

"Huh, you're a fox? Could you be a magical fox - no, maybe a kitsune?"

Harutora had originally believed that they had been dog ears and a dog tail. After hearing Harutora's question, Kon nodded. In that case, then the fireballs Kon had popped out just now might have been the so-called ' fox fire'.

Touji had explained that the standard manmade shikigami could hold external magical power. The ' external magical power' in this case was Kon's 'fox spirit', and in other words, Kon was a shikigami that practitioners had refined into a kitsune. Even so, Harutora actually didn't understand anything about what a fox spirit was.

He 'ohh'-ed somewhat curiously, learning forward to gaze at Kon's ears. Perhaps Kon felt a bit shy under Harutora's gaze, as her cheeks reddened and she turned away..... But her ears moved more and more intensely.

".....Can I touch them?"

"Hya!?"

"Ah, if you're unwilling, then I won't force--"

"N-N-No, that is not it, touch if you p-please....."

She lightly put her head forward and Harutora extended his hand with a "sorry".

He first felt Kon's ear between his fingers. Kon trembled like she had been electrified when he touched.

"Ohh, how soft - Haha, it even shakes, it's really like a puppy..... Ahah, all right, all right."

"....."

"Can I touch your tail too?"

"O, Of course....."

Kon was too shy to dare look at Harutora as she spoke, turning her back to him.

The feeling of her tail was even fluffier than her ears, and Harutora felt it softly, making a cheer of "Ohh!". He actually quite liked animals.

"It feels so nice, loose and soft..... Oh, it moved."

".....I, I-It honors me tremendously that you ..... enjoy it....."

"Yeah, this feels pretty good. On that note, I've never touched a fox before, so this is how their tails look."

"....."

Harutora continued to stroke her fox tail, prompting Kon to jolt straight every so often and then relax back down. She desperately endured it without daring to speak, her ears moving even more rapidly.

"Ah, sorry, is it itchy?"

"P-P-P-Please do not worry....."

"Can you move this tail at will? Actually, how does it move?"

"H, How--!?"

Harutora asked leisurely, but for some reason Kon cried out miserably.

Finally, she made a determined effort and stood up silently, her mouth tight and her show-white skin flushed down to her neck. Then, with her back towards the surprised Harutora, she slowly untied the sash around her waist.

"L-L-L-L-L, Like this!"

She spoke and suddenly pulled down her hakama.

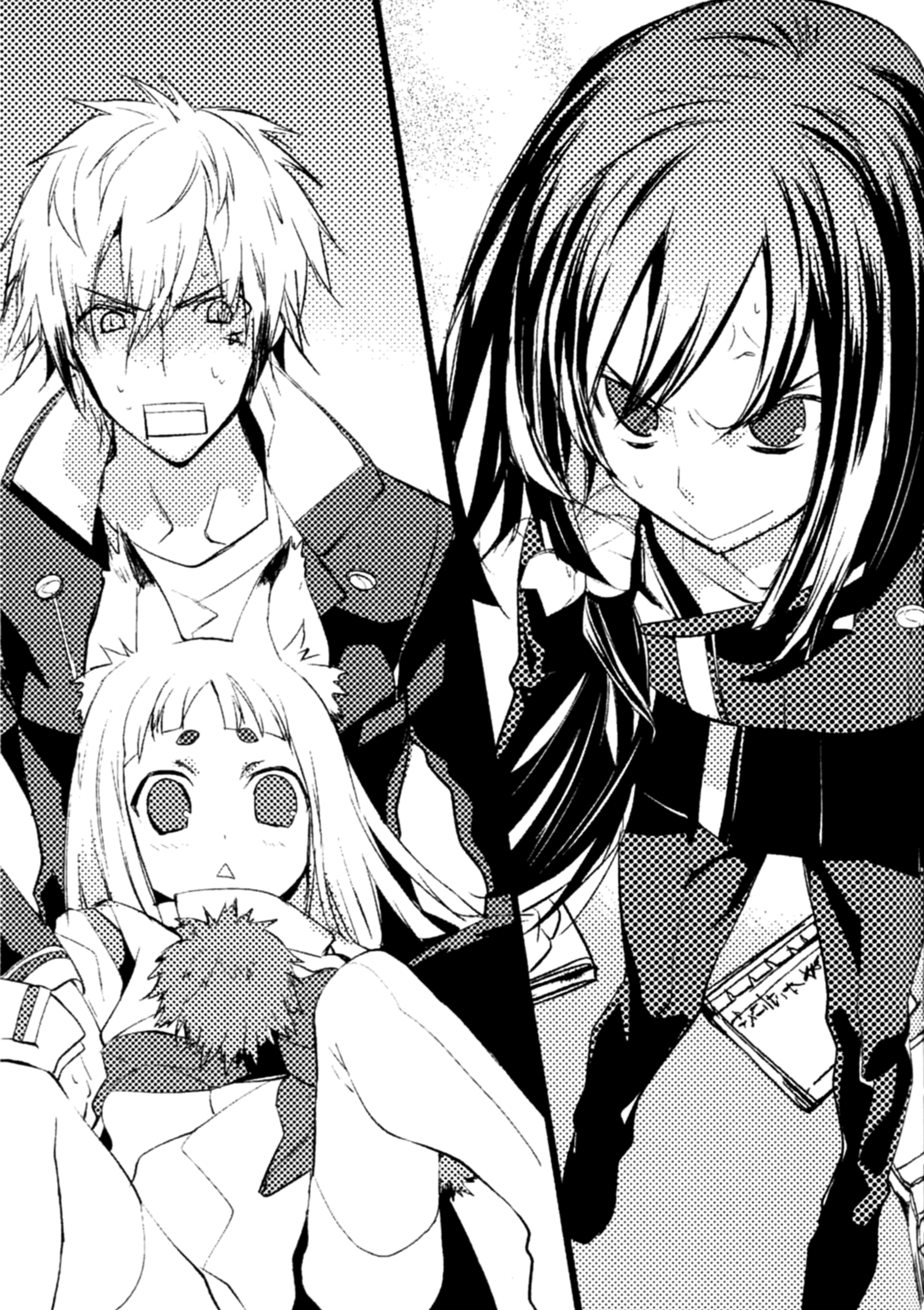
A constantly trembling tail and a snow-white butt appeared before Harutora--

"What's going on, Harutora! I took a detour to the library on the way home as a precautionary measure, and noticed that somehow, the books I designated were all still there--"

Natsume roughly flung open Harutora's door without knocking, her arms piled with a small mountain of books . An angry roar burst out as she walked into the room.

Time froze, everything going silent.

Kon wailed soundlessly, frantically pulling up her hakama but carelessly catching it on her foot. Harutora quickly reached out to support Kon as she fell into his chest - and as a result the two of them abruptly held on to each other as the untied hakama fell to her feet.



The books in Natsume's hands fell down one by one.

Kon was already completely frozen, but Harutora grabbed the fallen hakama with a speed challenging human limitations, pulling the hakama up like he was helping a child wear pants and tying the sash.

Then, he breathed deeply and was about to open his mouth, when--

".....Harutora?"

"Uh--"

".....What are you doing?"

"You're mistaken--"

This was Harutora's first time hearing such a tone from Natsume since he had been born, and the voice he replied with sounded like it hadn't come from his own mouth.

"Uh, you see, calm down and listen to my explanation, alright? You're mistaken, she's Kon, don't look at her like a child, she's actually a fox. More importantly, she's a

shikigami, not a human. Look at her tail and her ears for proof. So you're wrong, it's not like you're thinking....."

Natsume frowned, her eyes fiercely emitting some kind of dangerous feeling.

At the same time, Harutora seemed to see several self-made charms for magic appear in her fingers, and even though he was very concerned about why she was taking out charms, his attention was drawn more to the word 'danger' clearly written on them. Harutora's justifications became quieter and quieter.

".....Pervert."

"Hold on--"

".....Die."

"N, Natsume?"

The girl's body seemed as if it had swelled several times instantly - this was what he saw with his spirit-seeing ability, definitely unmistakable.

"Die, pervert! Order!"

'When I arrived, your heart had already stopped.'

Touji from next door told Harutora this afterwards. Of course, that was probably only a joke.

Part 4

In a certain room of an apartment building.

The light was on in the room, but it was permeated with an inexplicable ghostly atmosphere. A slight stench stung the nose, a peculiar odor.

".....The effects are more than expected, how unpleasant."

".....Yes, it's really unfortunate."

This was a secret base prepared as a precaution, like the so-called 'three holes to a rabbit's den'[7]. There were no furniture or appliances in the room, and many already-opened boxes were placed on the floor.

The boxes were of the same size, and each one was a cardboard box close to one meter in length. The exteriors were covered with charms and the interiors were stuffed full of dirt.

"Has the Onmyou Agency moved?"

"They look calm from the outside, but that's only the exterior."

"Could the council be being too cautious? The king has already confirmed his own identity."

"I feel the same, but it's much easier for us to act than pray to their cautious movement."

He carefully and warily scooped through the dirt in the box under the cold glow of the fluorescent light.

Not long after, he quietly took out an object from inside the dirt.

It was a pot. The pot was sealed shut, and incantations were densely written all over the outside.

He shook the pot slightly, and a definite presence came from inside. A cold, unrepressed smile emerged on his face.

"Have you contacted that person?"

"You mean the important one? Not directly."

"Might be useful, depending on the circumstances....."

"....I hadn't planned on showing my hand so quickly if possible."

He wiped off the dirt on the pot, slowly tearing off the seal.

Part 5

Shikigami uses were not classified by strict guidelines, contrary to the classifications of creation methods. For convenience purposes, the Onmyou Agency did classify shikigami that were publicly sold, but it was a fact that even these kinds of classifications were used very broadly.

For example, there were general-types that could be applied to various uses; transport-types that could be used to move the practitioner or transport objects; detection-types that could investigate over long distances using the five senses; binding-types that were mostly used by Mystical Investigators when they were

restraining criminals, and mechanical-types whose vessel became the shikigami's body.

'Defensive shikigami' were one of these types.

However, the semantics of a defensive shikigami were slightly different from the other types of shikigami.

The 'defensive' of defensive types came from the ' Dharma-defenders[8]' of Vajrayana and Shugendo Buddhism[9] As 'General Onmyoudou' was not limited to the old Onmyoudou of the past but rather was merged with various magics and magic systems of Japan, which of course included Vajrayana and Shugendo. Tracing the roots back, Dharma-defenders were called upon as deities or spirits to serve as servants or guards.

Actually, it seemed to fit the definition of the servant-type shikigami of the 'General-style'. In fact, defensive shikigami were replacements for the Dharma-defender servant shikigami, meant to serve a similar role.

Faithful shikigami guards that were always by their master, guarding them while complying with their master's orders.

Those were defensive shikigami.

.....But that hadn't come in handy yesterday.

Harutora secretly muttered to himself without speaking.

It was the day after he had hovered near the brink of death. The final class of the day was being held inside the Onmyou Academy building's classroom. The homeroom teacher Ohtomo was the lecturer, and this was Harutora's first time in his class. His frivolous personality was still unchanged even in class.

Just like yesterday, Harutora drew the attention of the students around him, but the reasons that they often stared at Harutora were different from yesterday's. Bandages could be seen all over Harutora's body, and healing charms were stuck everywhere.

After the incident yesterday, Harutora had used up most of the healing charms he had brought from home,

so there had been no serious problem. And he was finally able to explain the whole story to Natsume after he recovered.

Even so, Natsume's feelings didn't seem to have improved.

Regardless of what had happened in between, it was an indisputable fact that Kon - that Kon who appeared to be a young girl - had her butt in front of Harutora. More importantly, Harutora had ignored instructions in the first place and hadn't borrowed the books on his way home to the dorm.

Though Natsume had apologized for being mistaken about one of the things she had 'punished' Harutora for, she hadn't spoken a single word to Harutora after that, and even now she had returned to her seat in the corner of the classroom, continuing to not even look at Harutora .

Even worse, today even Touji was sitting in a slightly farther seat to show that he was 'maintaining a distance' from him. The Onmyou Academy didn't have assigned seats, so everyone sat where they wanted for each class. Touji had changed seats to gather information, making

Harutora go through class alone like someone who had escaped from an emergency room.

No, actually he wasn't alone.

"......Kon, are you here?"

He spoke softly, making sure not to be heard by the students around him.

"...I-I-I am present....."

Kon's reply reached his ears accordingly, but her figure still wasn't visible.

"Kon, listen up. I warned you in the morning, but please just stay properly hidden today, because I won't be able to take it if some accident happens, even if it's the smallest commotion."

Harutora showed a distrustful look as he stared in the direction the voice came from, and it seemed that he noticed a momentary light vibration, but it was fleeting.

After what happened yesterday, Harutora learned a lesson, and he ordered Kon to stay hidden unless called for, deciding that he wouldn't issue orders for the moment and let Kon stay behind him.

...Because this girl really lacked common sense and couldn't read the mood. In any case, listening to the Onmyou Academy classes was his priority for now, and there shouldn't be any opportunity for her to emerge, so waiting was the best policy for now.

Reconciling with Natsume, integrating with the students of the class, and learning Onmyoudou - there was a mountain of things to do. Among this heap of things, Harutora also planned becoming familiar with the environment and constructing a new 'normal life' as the first task, with not continuing to be foolish the most important part.

".....I'm really pitiful....."

Natsume seemed not to have any good feelings towards Kon, but since she was a defensive shikigami after all and was usually just hiding somewhere, the only thing he could do was endure and wait for her attitude to soften.

Just then--

"Hey, you're spacing out, new student! The one with ' Haru' in his name!"

"Wah! S, Sorry! I'm listening, I'm listening very seriously!"

"Then why are you apologizing?"

"Ah."

Harutora couldn't say anything for a while, and rustling snickers arose in the classroom. He felt like his neck was twitching, and he thought it was probably Natsume glaring angrily at him, but he didn't have the courage to turn around to confirm.

"That's not good, Harutora-kun. You're starting to slack on your second day after entering, how will you catch up to the past year of progress that you lost that way? In addition, the other teachers are all saying that your level is a lot worse than the others."

Ohtomo sighed deeply and deliberately, and Harutora recited to himself not to take this opportunity to speak, lowering his head and mumbling.

Actually, Ohtomo's words contained no malice, he just purely felt it interesting. Before class had started he had spoke brightly of Harutora's injury: "You can really make problems." It really made one wonder whether those words were suitable for a teacher.

"But it's inconsiderate to ask that you catch up to the class progress immediately, as the curriculum here - especially the lecture schedule - is quite packed, and there's no time at all to review after things are taught."

"I, I see....."

"Yeah, and anyways, even assuming that all of the students can keep up with the progress of the curriculum , even the teachers responsible for teaching the classes are very uneasy about whether the students truly understand."

Then--

Like he had thought of some idea from his own words, Ohtomo suddenly closed his mouth and went into deep thought.

Then, he grinned, closing the textbook in his hand with a thump.

"......Since two new students just transferred in, why don't we take advantage of this time to review the curriculum from last week. On one hand, it can be a review, and on the other hand it can check whether everyone truly understands the content of the curriculum ."

Ohtomo's sudden declaration led to a clamor in the classroom with some people letting out dissatisfied voices amidst it, but Ohtomo paid no heed at all.

But--

"Please don't be ridiculous!"

A student pounded the desk forcefully, standing up from her seat. It didn't need to be said that the student was Kurahashi Kyouko.

"Sensei, you believe that the curriculum is 'packed', but now you plan on delaying our progress for these two transfer students? Isn't this special treatment!"

She spoke clearly and logically like always, and Ohtomo blankly uttered a 'nn', but it wasn't apparent whether the expression on his face was confusion or indifference.

"Listen, Kyouko-kun. Doing this isn't only for Harutora-kun or Touji-kun, as I hope that everyone can take this opportunity to review."

"Reviewing is the responsibility of the individual! Since the curriculum is arranged with everyone being able to keep up as a premise, anyone who believes they cannot keep up with the progress obviously needs to be responsible for reviewing on their own. It's too strange to sacrifice the rights of the students who seriously want to listen to the lecture for these people with no self-awareness!"

"Hmm..... From what you say, it sounds like we should give up on those who can't keep up with the progress?"

Ohtomo deliberately asked to confirm. His tone was leisurely as always, but there was a clear probing gaze directed at Kyouko from underneath his glasses.

Kyouko understood Ohtomo's motive, straightening her back and replying without missing a beat:

"Isn't the curriculum arranged this densely for that purpose?"

The tone she replied with was strict and full of self-confidence, and she was extremely clear that such a statement could be criticized for being arrogant, as if she were deliberately provoking the people with such opinions of her thoughts.

However, Ohtomo replied with a: "Hmm, I guess", readily admitting Kyouko's beliefs.

"In the end, Onmyouji is not a profession that just anyone can get into. It is the education policy of the Onmyou Academy that especially making an effort to help lagging students is meaningless, and they are even anxious to kick out those who don't have the ability to keep up with the curriculum or the 'dull' ones who are unaware that they are falling behind."

Ohtomo spoke callously, and an alarm sounded in Harutora's mind.

How strict. And moreover, that strictness sounded ' natural' from Ohtomo's words.

Kyouko closed her mouth uninterestedly since the discussion was over, but Ohtomo continued to say:

".....But on the other hand, the Onmyou Academy gives every instructor quite a large jurisdiction, and it so happens that I don't agree with those policies."

"D, Don't agree? That....."

"Haha, it's very contradictory, right? Moreover, the Onmyou Academy knows that I oppose those policies yet still assigned me as an instructor, which is equivalent to silently accepting that contradiction. Do you know why the Onmyou Academy does that?"

Ohtomo asked with a smile, and of course, not a single student replied.

So, he said elatedly:

"That is magic."

...The fake leg under his thigh made a 'clunk' sound.

The crisp noise sounded particularly audible in the silence-filled classroom. "How is it? Isn't the world of adults really complex and strange?" Ohtomo smiled, mischievously adding on those words. However, his gaze was abnormally solemn as he spoke.

"Plainly speaking, if your goal is only to pass the ' Third-Class Onmyoudou' exam - No, even the ' Second-Class' - you don't actually need to understand that deeply. But, the goal of the Onmyou Academy isn't that small-scale. Though us lecturers are always saying the same thing, always wanting you to study hard, we're actually anticipating you to perform."

Ohtomo spoke like he was joking.

Actually, Harutora couldn't understand the contents of Ohtomo's speech, but the atmosphere was conveyed even if the meaning was hard to understand.

What was strange was that Ohtomo who calmly said ' That's magic' was actually quite persuasive.

He looked ordinary, spoke and acted frivolously, and his entire body gave off a hard to describe unreliable presence.

However, he was the only specialist inside this classroom, a true Onmyouji.

"Alright, that's how things are - everyone's getting more confused the more I say, right? Anyways, this is the Onmyou Academy and I'm your instructor, so everyone has to obediently listen to my instructions~"

Somehow, Ohtomo had led everyone by the nose. Maybe his true goal was to muddle everyone's thoughts, or in other words, every student had fallen to his ' confusion'.

...Wh, What was the story behind that teacher?

Touji was also showing a rare look of being unable to see through the other party. Even though Harutora was confused, his impression of Ohtomo still changed slightly .

The instructor on the podium spoke in a torrent, but actually there were still students who had escaped his confusion.

"......I, I can't accept.....!"

The one who squeezed those words out was Kyouko again.

"Even if you go over your reasons again, your decision right now was clearly for the two transfer students - No, it was partiality for the Tsuchimikado transfer student. Could it be that you only made that decision for him alone? I can't accept you doing that!"

Kyouko firmly refused to back down.

The situation was almost the same as yesterday's, and the students' gazes - also including Harutora's gaze - pointed towards Natsume who sat in the corner. It has nothing to with everyone whether you accept it or not - Natsume's angry snap rang in their ears.

But--

"....."

Natsume sat in her seat without even moving a muscle under everyone's gazes, even deliberately staring outside the window, feigning an indifferent appearance. A decent commotion arose among the greatly surprised students as they saw her reacting like that, and Harutora could only simmer bitterly.

...That girl is still sulking.

It was impossible for her to not have heard the argument in the classroom, but this time Natsume seemed to have no intention of coming forward to defend Harutora, unlike before.

As a result--

"We're discussing you! Could it be that you have no opinions to express? Tsuchimikado Harutora!"

"...Huh, me?"

Kyouko settled on Harutora who was looking uninvolved, and the gazes of all of the students instantly moved from Natsume to Harutora.

Since Natsume seemed inactive, Kyouko had turned her attack from the master to the shikigami. The

unprepared Harutora was helpless and couldn't help looking at Natsume's reaction again. Natsume was still looking out the window like always, and her slender neck looked a bit rigid..... She had no intention of helping him out at all.

With that, he could only rely on himself for relief, and more pertinently, this was his own problem in the first place, and it would make things even harder to wrap up if he dragged Natsume in again.

Okay. He changed his mindset, replying directly to Kyouko.

"I....."

As soon as he spoke, he noticed that everyone in the class perked up their ears, as this was the first time he, who often got the attention of everyone, actually formally spoke.

".....I, I indeed cannot keep up with the curriculum, and it would be a big help to me if sensei is willing to review the contents of last week's curriculum."

"It's alright even if that makes the other students with you waste their time?"

"No, I think that's more than I can expect."

"Then--!"

Kyouko was planning on taking the opportunity to claim victory, but Harutora immediately interrupted her words.

"I don't think I can expect that - but, I won't decline it. Since it was sensei's decision, I'll gratefully take the class.. .... Uh, though I might not be able to understand it."

Harutora replied honestly, shrugging his shoulders. Kyouko seemed to have not expected his attitude to be this magnanimous, and she stared at Harutora with wide eyes.

He hoped that he could construct a brand-new 'normal life' as calmly and stably as possible.

This kind of normal life couldn't lack the Onmyou Academy, or else it wouldn't have meaning. He was willing to spend time to make it happen, but it had no meaning if that normal life didn't have access to the necessary road of becoming an Onmyouji.

"In addition, as Natsume explained yesterday, talking about so-called unfairness is only a waste of breath, and there's no way that's possible. We don't have any intent of using the Tsuchimikado name to intimidate people, and to be honest, that name is no longer that incredible. Actually, I think it's just you all scaring yourselves..."

"Wha--"

"Uh, let's forget about the Tsuchimikado problem for now if I'm making trouble for everyone - I'm sincerely sorry, my apologies to everyone. But, you and I are students right now, so....."

Kyouko with no words to respond, and the students who waited with bated breath.

Harutora calmly opened his mouth to speak to them:

"I consider becoming an Onmyouji as my very first priority."

He didn't want to be the same as Natsume and counterattack with all his might, so instead he tried to take as much of a compromising and accepting attitude as possible.

But even so, he still had a bottom line that he couldn't concede.

The moment he announced this, Natsume who had been looking out the window turned around as if she had been surprised. But, Harutora who was facing off with Kyouko didn't consider it. He spoke self-assuredly though his heart was actually racing and thumping, barely managing to maintain his calm exterior.

Someone in the room whistled. No, he was very clear on who it was, Touji had definitely been the person who had whistled. Harutora almost curved his mouth into a light wry smile upon hearing his friend's irresponsible cheer.

The silence continued for a long while.

Kyouko stared intently at Harutora like it was her first time seeing him. Her lightly shaking shoulders were the proof of how furious she was.

Not long after--

"......Tsuchimikado Harutora, I apologize, but please take the initiative and drop out."

"Drop out? You want me to leave this place?"

"Right! You can't keep up with the Onmyoudou curriculum, that was already very clear from yesterday! The best of the people with goals to become Onmyouji are gathered here, it's not a place for an incompetent person like you!"

Kyouko hit the desk with a fist, shouting hysterically.

Harutora was even calmer than he would have expected. Maybe it was from making such an announcement in front of everyone, but the butterflies in his stomach let up.

"......Then I must ask you to be very tolerant....." He smiled as he spoke to the furious Kyouko.

Kyouko's face flushed red. "You.....!" She was speechless for a moment and took a step towards Harutora.

Just then--

"Halt, you impudent cur!"

Suddenly, Kyouko's body flew backwards.

Her entire body flipped around, her skirt lifting up and showing the unexpectedly cute panties underneath.

Just as the spectators were shocked and confused, Kon appeared with her beloved blade Kachiwari pointing towards the ground in front of the panicked Kyouko.

Her blue eyes flashed with light. Kon lowered her voice, declaring with a sharp tone:

"I followed orders and stayed silent by the side, but I did not anticipate you to speak so rudely towards Harutora-sama. I cannot tolerate this folly, you will now meet your fate at my blade--"

"--You're the rudest one!"

Harutora rushed forward, knocking Kon hard on the head. Her ears and tail shot up in surprise, and the characteristic 'lag' phenomenon of shikigami - as if she were glitching - passed through Kon's body.

"H-H-H, Harutora-sama! Why?"

"You dare ask! Didn't I just warn you not to be seen by others?"

"B, B-B-But this person was trying to approach Harutora-sama - I must uphold my duty as a guard."

"You're so annoying, you chivalrous shikigami! Come to think of it, to think you could speak that fluidly! You were messing with me before, right!?"

"A-A-A, Absolutely not! I dare not befool you! Y-Y-You are mistaken, Harutora-sama!"

Harutora grabbed on to the front of Kon's clothes, shaking her back and forth, and Kon desperately justified herself as she became dizzy.

The class became noisy during the pair's conversation, and the atmosphere became quite strange.

The sudden appearance of the small girl wasn't the reason leading to that reaction. As expected of the Onmyou Academy, the students seemed to instantly notice that Kon was a shikigami, but--

".....Oh, how surprising. Is that a defensive shikigami? " Ohtomo called out quietly, voicing the feelings of all the students, with a clear admiration in his tone.

"S, Sorry, sensei! I didn't do it on purpose, I'll quickly destroy her vessel!"

"D-D-Destroy!? Harutora-sama, is doing that not too harsh.....!"

"Shut up!"

"Oh, calm down, calm down. You should forgive such a cute and spirited shikigami."

Ohtomo spoke calmly, stopping the shouting master and shikigami.

"But I'm surprised, I never would have thought you had a defensive shikigami..... It seems that I had some preconceptions after hearing the other teachers' appraisals of you, I'll have to properly do some introspection."

"Huh? W, Why?"

"Alright, anyway, why don't you return to your seat first."

Harutora's momentum collapsed and Kon finally calmed down. Ohtomo still smiled brightly as he looked at the two, showing another admiring look and nodding his head.

"This should be a high-level type..... But the magic is quite dissimilar to the current 'General-style', and this is..... A seal? Truly eye-opening..... As expected of the Tsuchimikado."

"Uh..... Sensei?"

Ohtomo murmured quietly, and this time it was Harutora's turn to become anxious. He had even shocked Ohtomo, and the gazes from the students around him were completely different from before, as if they had noticed what they thought was a wild cat was actually a tiger.

What's more--

"Hakuou! Kokfuu!"

Two shikigami appeared behind Kyouko's back after her respective summons.

Those two were humanoid shikigami, one white and one black, about as tall as a male adult, but their figures as robust as boxers. The white shikigami held a Japanese katana and the black shikigami grasped a spear, and both shikigami were fully covered by meticulous knight's armor, looking from the outside as if they were robots. They seemed related to the Asura that Dairenji Suzuka had controlled before, as they gave off a similar impression.

They were the defensive shikigami created by the Onmyou Agency, 'G2 Yaksha'.

"To think you would trick me like this, how devious of you!"

"What?'

"Don't pretend! Purposefully pretending to be incompetent is a bit too circuitous, what are you planning?"

"What, huh? .....Huh, I don't understand what you mean."

Harutora hastily backed up, at a loss. In contrast, Kon held Kachiwari behind his feet, her eyes flashing killing intent and fiercely staring at the opposing shikigami. The students in nearby seats frantically put distance between Harutora and Kyouko in order to keep from encountering disaster.

"C, Calm down! I was apologizing to you, I really had no ill intentions!"

"Don't joke around. Since you charged at me, I will accept your challenge just as I had been thinking!"

Kyouko shouted, swinging her arm to the side, and the two 'Yaksha' took a fighting posture accordingly.

Harutora broke out in a cold sweat.

On the other hand, outside the ring encircling Harutora and Kyouko, Touji had silently gotten up and Natsume had reached her hand into the charm box tied to her waist with a serious look.

The atmosphere was taut, and the fragile tension constricted the students' breathing.

But--

"Okay, I know!"

Ohtomo called out cheerfully.

Then, he spoke in a reckless tone considering the atmosphere in the classroom:

"One of you is unyielding, and one of you is vigorous, very nice. It seems that you two can more or less control shikigami, so why don't we let you have a demonstration battle!"

""What?""

Harutora and Kyouko's surprised voices happened to overlap. Perhaps those were the feelings of all the students, not just the two of them.

"It's today's last class anyway. Harutora-kun, Kyouko-kun, why don't we go to the magic practice field and have a shikigami showdown." Ohtomo happily said.

Chapter 3 - Shikigami Showdown

Part 1

Underneath the Onmyou Academy building was a spacious area rivaling an athletics field - a magic training field used for practical coursework.

The arena of the magic training field was about as large as three or four basketball courts, and it was about three stories high, with spectator seating above the two-meter tall walls that encircled it. It looked like an indoor stadium, but the biggest difference was the altar set in the back and the incantations and patterns written on the walls. In addition, there were light green pillars on either side of the entrances with magical power-infused shimenawa[10] roped across them protecting the outside against the spells cast inside the arena.

Just then, the students in Ohtomo's class were walking in and sitting in the spectator seats, gazing around the arena.

".....So this is where practicals are held."

"Other places also have classrooms for practical trainings, but this is still the biggest."

Touji looked around the underground magic practice field below the spectator seats, and Tenma who sat next to him replied.

"Speaking of first-class magic training, this place could be called one of the nation's largest altars. The outer walls of this place have undergone enchantment by National First-Class Onmyouji, and not even the strongest magic can breach it - even a third phase spiritual disaster couldn't destroy it. Even people from the Onmyou Agency come to borrow it sometimes."

"It's such a luxury to come to this impregnable fortress for a quarrel."

Touji crooked his mouth, 'hmph'ing ironically. However meddlesome he was, he had never expected the situation to develop into this.

He casually sized up the surroundings, searching for Natsume's position among the students spectating the battle. She was sitting in the second row by herself, separated from the arena by a distance of one row.

Even now, Natsume still hadn't shown any intention of coming forward to help Harutora. Though she was pretending to be calm, the restlessness in her heart was clear from a glance. Regret and contradiction was written all over her face, and she stared imposingly at the arena.

At the moment, the people standing in the arena were the warming-up, motivated Kon and Kyouko who had recalled the two Yaksha for now. Ohtomo was together with Harutora who seemed still unprepared, and they hadn't yet appeared.

"Is this class always this casual?"

"It's not."

"Maybe our instructor is a bit too carefree."

"That..... I can't say it's not true....."

Tenma showed a wry smile and a difficult expression towards Touji's straightforward questions.

"In the end, he originally wasn't a teacher, and he only just began as an Onmyou Academy lecturer this semester ..... Honestly, he's not very good at teaching."

"What was his profession before?"

"He was originally a Mystical Investigator before he retired because of his foot injury, and he was quite excellent - at least he says so."

"A Mystical Investigator, huh....."

Mystical Investigators - magical criminal investigators specialized in anti-personnel magic, the Onmyouji specialty that required the most ability. Unfortunately, the only impression Touji had of them was of being brushed off by Dairenji Suzuka as if they had been minions or background characters. Of course, this was all due to their opponent at the time being too strong.

"Right, Tenma. Regarding the incident that happened just now - Harutora just called a shikigami. Weren't the reactions of Kurahashi Kyouko and everyone else a bit too intense?"

"Ahh, if it were only a standard shikigami everyone's reactions wouldn't have been that surprised, but it's because Harutora-kun called forth a defensive shikigami. "

Tenma replied to Touji's question honestly. The two of them had just met yesterday, but today they were already quite friendly.

"I remember you said yesterday that in this class only Natsume and Kurahashi Kyouko had defensive shikigami. Is that little thing really that powerful of a shikigami?"

"Actually, it's not that it's powerful..... Defensive shikigami and servant-type shikigami are basically shikigami that have to be summoned all the time, so it's an unusually heavy burden for the person they serve. Though the burden is comparatively lighter when they're not materialized, they still have to maintain a link of spiritual energy at all times, and so anyone without particularly strong magical power is unable to control those kinds of shikigami."

"Oh, I see. Simply put, a magical power that's not strong enough won't be able to control one."

"Right, so servant-type or defensive shikigami are a kind of status symbol for Onmyouji."

"So that's why everyone felt it so unexpected that an outsider like Harutora would have a defensive shikigami ."

Touji nodded his head knowingly. Then, it was Tenma's turn to lean in towards Touji.

".....Hey, Touji-kun. Honestly, how is Harutora-san's strength? I originally believed he was an outsider, but..... Was he really helped out by the Tsuchimikado family?"

Tenma didn't forget to be careful of the surroundings as he asked this, and the eyes behind his glasses couldn't conceal his curiosity. Touji hmphed, shrugging his shoulders.

"That guy's normal expression is his most truthful appearance, and that little guardian was a parting gift his dad gave him when he left, so he doesn't actually know how to control it well."

"He, he indeed looked like he couldn't really control it.. ...."

"But....."

A sharp, cold light flashed across Touji's eyes, and his mouth curved into a cold smile, bringing about an arrogant air.

"If you look down on him for that, there's a good chance you'll suffer for it. This summer is an example."

Touji's tone changed, and Tenma couldn't help but look at him and utter a "Huh?" sound. But, Touji didn't heed Tenma's gaze and just stared intently at the arena.

Touji hadn't witnessed first-hand how the incident caused by Dairenji Suzuka this summer had been wrapped up, after all. Something had happened on the ' Imperial Hill' altar, but he had only heard the ins and outs of Harutora's point of view, so he didn't understand Harutora's true strength either.

Because of this, he was quite interested in this shikigami showdown regardless of how things would develop.

Tenma stared at Touji, his gaze rather confused, still seeming confused about what the 'example' referred to.

"...On the other hand, Harutora-kun is really slow. What's he doing?" He deliberately changed the subject as if noticing that Touji was unwilling to continue talking. Touji's expression softened considerably from his consideration.

"......Though I shouldn't say this in front of you yourself..."

"Huh? What?"

"If you want to make friends with an intelligence source, it seems like it's more suitable to have a bit more of an evil heart."

"......Is that praise? Or derogatory?"

That roundabout explanation sounded incomprehensible to Tenma. Touji didn't respond, just deliberately letting a warm smile show on his expression.

Just then--

"Ah, he's here! ......Huh, what's going on?"

Tenma looked at the arena and shouted, and Touji also leaned his body forward slightly.

Harutora and Ohtomo, who had volunteered to referee , showed up in the arena where Kyouko and Kon were waiting.

But, it couldn't be told immediately whether or not the person who walked into the arena was actually Harutora.

Because--

".....Why is that guy wearing a kendo protector?"

"A, And he's even wearing miasma-protection clothing on top of it! That's exorcist equipment!"

The Harutora who appeared in the arena was wearing a kendo mask on his head, with a chest protector and protective gloves on his body and also a black outer garment over it. Not only Natsume and the other students but even his opponent Kyouko and his teammate Kon widened their eyes in surprise.

Just as an uproar swept over the vast magic training field, the strangely outfitted Harutora walked straight towards the center where Kyouko was waiting.

Then, Ohtomo gave Harutora a wooden sword.

Touji couldn't help but laugh hilariously upon seeing that scene, instantly seeing through what Harutora was attempting.

"......Not bad, it's very like his style."

Touji delightedly spoke softly to himself beside the confused Tenma.

Part 2

"Why?"

Those were Harutora's heartfelt feelings.

"I'm a new student who just entered yesterday, and I'm a beginner with extraordinarily meager experience, right ? Are the methods of the Onmyou Academy too arbitrary ? What kind of devilish ideas is this Ohtomo person planning? Can Onmyouji be this random?"

"Harutora-kun~? I heard all of your heartfelt feelings~"

Harutora muttered complaints non-stop as he walked towards the magic practice field.

Kyouko and the other students had long since gone to the magic practice field as he was protesting to Ohtomo. Because Harutora was troublesome, he had literally forced Kon to go first and stayed behind alone to

continue convincing Ohtomo - but unfortunately, he still failed in the end and could only walk together with Ohtomo and with heavy steps to the arena.

"Sensei, are you serious? You don't plan on saying something and smoothing things over like before?"

"I don't."

"As an educator, aren't your methods a little too irresponsible?"

Harutora's tone carried resentment, but that probably wasn't anything unexpected, and Ohtomo didn't have any intention at all of replying to that directly.

"Alright, alright, this isn't bad. Anyway, you just entered the academy but you're about to be isolated, right? Doesn't everyone think of you as a fool and exclude you?"

"Uwah, to think you wouldn't be concerned at all about the fragile heart of a transfer student, saying it that directly."

"Since you have a defensive shikigami, shouldn't you take this opportunity to show your hand and restore

your reputation? Don't you think I'm planning this intentionally while really thinking of my students?"

"Not at all! Moreover, I'm definitely going to lose, and it's going to be a spectacular failure!"

"You can't make an omelet without breaking eggs, and anyway your position won't get any worse no matter how you shame yourself."

"That's too much! Is that something an instructor should say?"

"Don't get me wrong, the Onmyou Academy may be a school, but it's just a school for teaching specialized techniques."

Ohtomo spoke happily, his cane and fake leg making thumping sounds as they knocked on the ground. This person was really unredeemable. Harutora's face sank.

"Also--" Ohtomo didn't change his flippant tone. " Natsume-kun is an extremely excellent student, especially his servant shikigami. No wonder it's a Tsuchimikado guardian beast, it's one of very few

spiritual beasts in the country, and it's very strong even if it can barely be used. A normal Onmyouji can't compare to him even among specialists."

"......Why do you suddenly mention Natsume?"

"Yeah, my meaning is that Natsume-kun is very strong , but he still can't contend with one of the Twelve Divine Generals. He wouldn't be able to manage if he were only by himself."

Harutora couldn't say anything for a while and stared at the back of Ohtomo who had stopped in front of him.

Ohtomo had once expressed that he knew insider information, but Harutora hadn't expected that he would bring up Dairenji in this kind of time.

He turned around, his mouth showing a mocking smile.

"Harutora-kun, you're truly an outsider, but you don't need to look down on yourself that much. You already have done an extremely incredible thing even in the eyes of a specialist Onmyouji."

"I, I didn't do anything at all."

"That's not for sure. So-called magic doesn't just have to look mighty and powerful, and actually, it is the second-class magic that is truly influential. Even outsiders who haven't encountered magic can cast spells unwittingly."

Ohtomo spoke similar words to what the principal had said, but it was still incomprehensible to the ears of Harutora who couldn't distinguish first and second-class magic at all.

But Ohtomo didn't seem concerned, continuing to say:

"In addition, didn't the principal say something? The Onmyou Academy will not gather unqualified students regardless of how many reasons there are. More importantly, the process of judging whether someone is qualified or not is quite profound and complex, not something shallow like relying on you to decide for yourself."

"....."

Harutora stared silently at Ohtomo.

Was this person planning on fooling him with smoke and mirrors again? But, Ohtomo's words moved his heart and he couldn't pay them no heed.

Ohtomo strode forward again.

"Your number one goal is to become an Onmyouji, right?"

"....."

"Actually, I was finally reassured when I heard that sentence. I know that you definitely won't give up on your goal of becoming an Onmyouji regardless of what kind of troubles you encounter in the future. Therefore, don't worry so much. The Onmyou Academy acknowledges your qualifications, and it won't be a problem reaching your goal as long as you just continue growing at your own pace."

Thump, thump, Ohtomo's steps sounded along the corridor. Harutora stood still for a while and then chased after Ohtomo who was walking ahead.

The Onmyou Academy was mysterious, whether the building, curriculum, students, or teachers alike. But the most unknown element among them was the 'Onmyouji'.

But, it was his goal to become an Onmyouji.

In order to respect his promise with Natsume.

In order to realize Hokuto's dream.

".....Ohtomo-sensei."

Harutora made his decision, calling out to Ohtomo. " Yeah?" Ohtomo turned around again.

"For the shikigami battle in a while....."

"What is it? Don't worry, I'll stop the competition quickly before you get injured."

Harutora shook his head, denying Ohtomo's joke.

"I have something to ask of you - can I talk with you?"

After Harutora made his request and the two of them spoke, the result was that Harutora put on a suit of

kendo equipment and miasma-protection clothing before entering the arena.

Kyouko frowned, and even Kon looked at him dumbstruck. Harutora couldn't help but feel embarrassed, his face flushing red underneath his faceguard.

"I didn't say I wanted to wear this exaggerated equipment."

"Idiot, since I'm agreeing to your request, protection of this level is natural. I would be the one responsible if you got injured. Here."

Ohtomo spoke distressedly, giving Harutora a wooden sword. Actually, this wooden sword was the thing Harutora had requested from Ohtomo - more accurately, he just wanted this 'weapon'.

"I've cast a bit of magic on it and on your protector too, of course. So even if you get hit head-on, you might not split in half along with your wooden sword. Be thankful. "

"Y, Yes, thanks sensei."

Harutora tried swinging the wooden sword after receiving it. He had only practiced a bit of kendo during middle school physical education class, but it was much more comfortable than fighting bare-handed.

".....Alright."

He nodded his head to urge himself on and left Ohtomo's side.

"H, H-H, Harutora-sama? That outfit is.....?"

Kon was speechless for a long time at Harutora's equipment. Harutora clumsily shrugged his shoulders from under his protector.

"Listen, Kon, this is my battle plan."

"Y, Yes..... Huh? Battle plan?"

"Yes, the plan's very simple actually, you get the white one, and I'll deal with the black one."

".....Uh, um, Harutora-sama? You mean....."

Kon's face was full of confusion, her big tail swishing back and forth anxiously as she didn't know how to respond.

Just then--

"What are you playing at?"

Kyouko spoke angrily, her tone extremely scornful.

"This is a battle between shikigami, a very common thing in practical training. Shikigami are the fighters in this battle, the practitioners don't act..... but I won't stop you if you're still that scared about it."

"Silence, wench! If you dare open your mouth towards Harutora-sama again--"

"Hey! Calm down, Kon."

From behind, Harutora hurriedly restrained Kon who was about to charge forward, enduring the tickling brought about from her tail and lifting her up. Kon's feet kicked around in empty air.

"H-H-Harutora-sama, please release me~"

"First, don't interrupt me! ...Kurahashi, you meant ' however I like' just now, right? So you have no opinion even if I use a weapon?"

".....How unbearable. You're scared of my shikigami that much even when you're ordering your shikigami from afar?"

"After all, they have katanas and spears in their hands, and I don't have the courage to face them unarmed."

Harutora admitted it readily, and Kyouko raised her eyebrows in surprise, seeming like she didn't understand the meaning of his words. Then, her eyes widened as she finally understood their implication.

Harutora planned on also entering himself and fighting with the shikigami.

"Th-Th-Th-That cannot be allowed, Harutora-sama!"

"Who cares about that, aren't there two shikigami on the other side? Your size and weight can't compare to them at all, and there's no chance of winning at all when you make it two-against-one."

"W, What, what do you mean?! In the first place, don't you know that as the number of shikigami increases, controlling them also becomes more difficult? Number is a test of the practitioner's strength, don't think having more shikigami is unfair!"

"I didn't mean that, I was just saying that with me, it's two against two."

Harutora spoke calmly, but Kyouko shouted hoarsely:

"Don't joke around! What kind of practitioner does something stupid like fight a shikigami! This is a shikigami battle, only shikigami can fight!"

"And I'm also a shikigami."

Harutora replied calmly and objectively from under his faceguard. Kyouko shook her head, stunned.

The students in the spectator seats all gaped at Harutora's words. Of course, Tenma wasn't excluded, and Natsume's reaction was the same. The only one excluded from this was Touji who had been laughing since the beginning.

"Sensei agreed."

"Really, sensei?"

"Really."

"Could your brain be broken?"

"That's painful to hear, Kyouko-kun. But that spirit is pretty good."

"......To think you didn't deny it."

Harutora let Kon down and glanced at Ohtomo. Kyouko seemed to find the situation's development hard to accept because of the instructor's complete confession, softly muttering "......How did this kind of thing happen? "

"It's about time to begin. Especially since it was you who proposed a fight in the first place."

"What? I won't oppose you if you want to stop the battle, since I was just going to play along with you for a fight anyway."

Saying this[11], Harutora smiled for a bit, and Kyouko gritted her teeth when she saw that, so angry that her whole body shook.

Then, she fiercely raised her head, looking into the spectator seats.

"Natsume-kun, is this the Tsuchimikado way? You don't plan on stopping him?"

"......Ugh!"

Natsume who had suddenly been singled out went stiff, her look becoming tense as if she were condemned to death row and handed the pistol for the execution.

"Natsume-kun!"

"....."

Natsume didn't reply to Kyouko's yell. Her eyes rapidly turned to Harutora, as if fleeing.

However, Harutora didn't even glance at Natsume.

"Don't go too far. I'm the person fighting with you, not Natsume."

Kyouko turned her gaze because of Harutora's unconcerned attitude. She wordlessly stared at Harutora for a long time as if ridding herself of her hesitation and then finally called her guardians' names.

Two Yaksha showed themselves again.

The students in the spectator seats chattered, and Natsume who was observing the development from the side couldn't help but stand up.

"......I won't care if something happens to you."

Kyouko's face was slightly pale as she gave that warning, but Harutora didn't speak, swinging the wooden sword again to confirm its feeling.

"H-H-H, Harutora-sama. Forgive my transgression, but I cannot agree to this plan. It is my responsibility to battle with the enemy, so if Harutora-sama would please stay back....."

"Nope."

Harutora interrupted tersely, turning down Kon's begging--

--But, his look then relaxed.

"In the end, I don't understand methods of using shikigami at all either."

"D-D-Do not let that small matter bother you, Harutora-sama....."

"Sorry, but that's meaningless. Even if I don't understand ways to use shikigami, I still have to find some way of my own."

Saying this, Harutora put his hand on the shikigami's small head, lightly patting her twice.

"So, I want to start trying from the most direct methods. I definitely don't mean that I distrust you, and also there's a good chance that I'll be the person to retreat ."

"B-B-But....."

"Don't make that face, I have a bit of fighting experience more or less. I'm counting on you, comrade."

"....."

Kon gazed at Harutora, worry emerging on her innocent face. A few moments later, she tightened her lips and silently turned towards Kyouko and her shikigami.

".....Hey, is he serious?"

"No way, that person....."

As the students watching the fight on the sidelines whispered to each other, the sound of their discussion became noisier and noisier. The voices that had originally been dissatisfied and belittling gradually turned to simple shock and excitement. Noise spilled forth from all directions, and Harutora purposefully dismissed them from his mind.

He let his consciousness focus on the fight in front of him.

He hoped to gain some useful experience through this battle.

".....Seems like both sides are prepared."

Once Ohtomo noticed, his voice rang through the entire magic battlefield, and the surroundings temporarily fell silent.

"Then - Start!"

The shikigami showdown began upon that order.

"This is terrible, I almost can't bear to watch."

"....."

He stared intently at the fight from a corner of the arena, in the shadow of the pillar behind the spectator seats.

The two Yaksha that Kyouko controlled were currently fighting fiercely against Harutora and Kon in the arena. But Kyouko's shikigami didn't seem to be moving very agilely, maybe due to the fact that their opponent was human, and Kon couldn't focus her mind on dealing with her own enemy because she was concerned about Harutora. Only Harutora himself was single-minded, but Harutora was rolling around on the ground after being sent flying by the black shikigami's - Kokfuu's - spear.

"That's the shikigami chosen by the king?"

"......The King of the North Star hasn't awakened yet and is only an immature child right now. It's a human emotion to want to keep close acquaintances by your side ."

"But to think he would choose such a low youngster, how dissatisfying."

"Quite so."

He was indeed quite unhappy, even feeling angry. He felt that not only the King of the North Star's radiance but even his own ideals and loyalty that he dedicated to the king had been trampled upon and soiled.

Once the king awoke, he would definitely immediately rectify this ugliness.

But regardless of how soon that would be, he couldn't make the king do such a lowly action. He couldn't tolerate such an act.

There had to be someone by the king's side leading his actions until the king awoke.

Moreover, he believed that he was the only one for that heavy responsibility.

Part 3

"What were you thinking!"

Harutora had taken off his kendo protector after the fight had ended and was sitting on a bench in the locker room. Natsume charged in from the spectator seats with a momentum that almost sent him flying. Harutora and Kon were the only ones in the locker room. Touji also came to visit Harutora in the locker room, but came later than Natsume.

"What was I thinking..... What do you mean?"

"Of course I meant the fight just now! To think you would take the field and fight against shikigami yourself, are you crazy? What would you do if you got hurt?"

"That's why I dressed up like this."

"That's just pointless! Especially since your opponents are Yaksha, you could have lost your life if you were careless!"

Natsume was so angry her face was flushed as she scolded him in a torrent. Harutora knitted his brow and shut his mouth as he sat on the bench, since after all he had been beaten black and blue just now and was in no position to refute.

The result of the fight wasn't out of anyone's expectations, and Harutora had failed spectacularly.

Kyouko's defensive shikigami Hakuou and Kokfuu weren't opponents Harutora could contend with in either movement or combat skills. The 'G-model shikigami' sold by the Onmyou Agency had extraordinary combat skill and techniques even unarmed, and Hakuou and Kokfuu had mastered the sword and the spear respectively.

Of course, they relied on their practitioner's control to be able to use those abilities. Kyouko's skill at controlling the Yaksha was quite good even if she was using two shikigami at once. Kyouko was obviously somewhat hesitant at the start due to having a human as her opponent, but either she changed her thoughts soon or got annoyed at Harutora's games, as she stopped being merciful and Harutora and Kon were completely unable to parry the violent attacks. Of course, Kyouko had been hitting with the back of the blade since the beginning.

She had her shikigami deftly use the spear tip as it attacked Harutora, throwing him around, pressuring him , and knocking him over however she pleased.

The spectators in the stands who had watched with bated breath at the beginning ended up constantly laughing and joking ironically; among them, Touji was the one who exploded into laughter the most unscrupulously.....

"Why don't you fight back a bit seriously! I don't agree with what Kurahashi Kyouko says, but swinging that wooden sword and standing on the battlefield together with your shikigami are laughable actions!"

"I, I was very serious."

"Did you truly think that battle just now was very ' serious'!? You were mocked and the people watching laughed at you..... Could it be that you don't feel bad inside?"

Natsume roared with a red face, seeming quite mad. But, Harutora felt a bit confused rather than introspective or disagreeing. He didn't really understand what Natsume was mad for.

Moreover, though Natsume had asked him 'could it be that you don't feel bad inside', Harutora actually didn't feel one bit discontent at all, even if he had lost this fight. At the least, the powerless and empty feeling from after class yesterday hadn't overflowed his heart.

He wasn't dissatisfied with losing, nor was he showing off, but rather he had an enriched feeling as if he had grasped his own pace for the first time. Harutora's attitude of altogether accepting his loss had completely enraged Natsume, but the immature shikigami wasn't perceptive enough and was unable to notice the subtle changes in his master's heart.

".....H, H-Harutora-sama....."

Kon lightly tugged on the hem of Harutora's uniform from behind his back.

".....I-I-I, Is it alright to allow her to wantonly abuse you like this?"

"Whew, idiot..... Didn't I say it very clearly yesterday? She's the next heir of the main family, and I'm currently her shikigami."

".....B-B-But....."

A look even more discontent than Harutora's emerged on the shikigami's innocent face, not only for losing the fight, but also for being unable to rebut Natsume's angry words.

Natsume wordlessly stared daggers at Kon as the two of them whispered. Even Kon couldn't help but silence herself when that curse-like, vicious gaze stared at her.

Harutora had told Kon about the circumstances relating to Natsume yesterday, and Kon was definitely able to clearly distinguish Natsume as being from the main family, even if her attitude towards people other than Harutora didn't change.

Even so, she still tried to defend her master.

".....J-Just now Harutora-sama lost all because of th-th-that wooden sword prepared by that smiley fake Onmyouji..... It's definitely not because of H-Harutora-sama's skill.....!"

"Wooden sword?"

Natsume couldn't help but ask upon hearing Kon's defense, and Touji who had originally been crossing his

arms silently on the side spoke as if he had thought of something surprising:

"So the problem was there? That trick truly was a bit unfortunate. Harutora, you originally planned on using that opportunity, right?"

"W, Wait up, what are you saying?"

"You didn't notice? Before the fight ended, that black shikigami's attack rhythm became quite monotonous, perhaps because of habit or carelessness. At that time, this guy was busying himself with defense while secretly gauging the distance, planning on avoiding the spear attack and taking advantage of that opportunity to get close to the enemy."

Kon nodded her head vigorously from behind Harutora as she heard Touji's explanation, but Harutora turned his head embarrassedly.

Actually, Harutora had used the difference in range of the two weapons, shortened the distance between the two of them, had even succeeded in drawing and avoiding Kokfuu's attack, and charged over in a flash.

But, just as he was going to pull out all the stops and strike with all his power, the wooden sword he was swinging suddenly fractured in midair from the blade to the center - and moreover, it had fragmented from the inside out.

".....Didn't it fracture because he attacked the opponent's armor?"

"Nn..... I was focusing on attacking at the time, and actually I'm not really sure what happened. But sensei truly said that he had 'cast magic' on it, and it's probably a result of the gradual accumulation of the shocks that it had endured before. That just goes to show that the opponent's attacks were just too powerful, so I can't make any dispute."

"Th-That is not the case, it's the fault of that f-f-fake Onmyouji!"

"Fake Onmyouji..... When the wooden sword fractured, I also got angry at that rotten teacher. But anyway, it's just more of that misfortune."

Harutora smiled wryly, trying to calm the raging anger of his shikigami.

However, he unconsciously glanced at Natsume and noticed that his childhood friend's face had become paler than before.

"......This is way too ridiculous." Natsume trembled as she spoke.

"Huh? W, Why?"

"I don't know what magic Ohtomo-sensei cast on the wooden sword, but he should have strengthened the wooden sword to endure the Yaksha's attacks, right?"

"Ah, if I remember, he said something like that..... So what?"

"Are you stupid! To think you would enter a fight where even a magically strengthened wooden sword would split in half! You should have some self-awareness, right!"

Natsume's roars sounded even more angry now than when she had charged into the locker room just recently. Harutora flinched in surprise, looking at Natsume, but she didn't seem willing to even look at Harutora.

Her symmetric face was twisted from anxiety and other emotions.

"You're too full of yourself, can you even consider yourself a Tsuchimikado like that? Magic is extremely dangerous! Since you're stupid, use that stupid brain of yours to think a bit before acting!"

Her tone shook near the end and her tone became more and more furious.

Harutora finally couldn't stand it upon hearing this scolding.

"......Is that an 'order', master?"

"What!?"

"......I'm very sorry I humiliated you again, but unfortunately, these are my methods, and if you aren't satisfied, then you'd better hurry up and fire a shikigami like me."

Harutora pouted and turned his head after saying that. Natsume's eyes widened and she stood still, stunned and almost unblinking, unable to stop her shoulders from twitching.

Tears started filling those eyes that stared at Harutora from her hysterical emotions.

Then, she repressed her emotions with all of her remaining willpower.

"......If you think those methods work, then why don't you just go....."

Saying this, Natsume turned her back towards Harutora and the others - She ran out of the locker room without looking back, her tied hair flying around.

"......H-Harutora-sama....."

Kon looked at Harutora, not knowing what to do. Even Kon who had been dissatisfied with Natsume's tough attitude was helpless upon encountering this anger. Harutora's face sank, and he decided to ignore his flustered shikigami.

Touji sighed lightly.

"......She said that because she was worried about you."

His agitated emotions cooled off momentarily because of those words.

"I know."

Harutora replied, his tone having long since lost the enriching feeling of having grasped his own pace that had been audible in it just recently.

The second day since he had entered the academy ended just like that. Harutora sighed deeply in front of his good friend and the shikigami who worried about him.

Actually, the situation had already started changing by this time.

Things happened in a form that Harutora and the others had never expected and in a place that they were not aware of.

Part 4

The next morning.

Harutora had stuck on more healing charms for the bruises left from yesterday's injuries. Once he walked

into the classroom, he instantly felt that the atmosphere was a bit strange. Though he couldn't say why, it was different from the previous two days.

He didn't really know where that abnormal feeling came from, even thinking that he was to blame as he walked past the podium in wonder.

Natsume was already sitting in her old seat. She immediately turned her head towards the window after glancing at Harutora as he entered the classroom. In the end, this kind of reaction wasn't unexpected after their big argument recently, but Harutora had still felt a heavy heart since the morning.

Touji planned on keeping a set distance to observe the situation today as well, so Harutora sat by himself in the same seat as yesterday.

He prayed from his heart, hoping that he could pass a smooth, uneventful day today.

".....G, Good morning, Tsuchimikado-kun."

"Huh? Ah, good morning....."

After Harutora sat down, three female students walked over together.

Harutora had seen them before since they were classmates, but he had never greeted them before since he didn't know their names. He surveyed the faces of the three in surprise.

"Hey, are you free now?"

"......Uh, I guess so..... W, What is it? Do you need something?"

"No, we actually don't....."

One of them spoke shyly. The other two egged her forward from behind, urging her to hurry up and thereby making Harutora confused.

Could they be here to bully a new student? Maybe the classmates had finally started moving on the third day after he had entered. What if they felt he was an eyesore? But just as Harutora was worrying by himself--

"Y, Yesterday's fight was wonderful, but your injuries aren't bad, right?"

"What? Oh, thanks. These small wounds are nothing."

"That's great. But I was really surprised, I never thought there would be someone fighting a shikigami with a wooden sword."

"I, Indeed..... No one would do that."

Harutora replied in a stammer, and the two who had been standing in the back suddenly moved forward upon hearing that.

"And the opponent was Kurahashi-san's defensive shikigami, right? That's so incredible!"

"I, I don't know much about that. But I think..... It's not that incredible?"

"Then why else did you yourself fight?"

"Why..... In the end I don't know how to cast magic, and I don't get how to control shikigami for battle..... So I wanted to at least help out directly a bit - that's it."

"No way! You fought because of that?"

"Unbelievable!"

The three girls cried out softly side-by-side. Harutora, who still wasn't sure what was going on, was surprised into showing a perplexed expression.

Then, two male students who were watching from the distance called out to the three girls and took the opportunity to approach Harutora's seat.

They smiled a bit stiffly at Harutora.

".....Hi, yesterday was truly unfortunate, Tsuchimikado. You're pretty courageous to not run away like a chicken."

"Right, I'd quickly run away at the start if I were fighting with Kurahashi."

The two male students seemed to feel a bit ashamed about not having spoken with him over the past two days, unlike the carefree girls. Even if they couldn't hide their embarrassment, they still showed sincere goodwill and spoke interestedly with Harutora. This action made Harutora unable to help but feel surprised from the bottom of his heart.

"I haven't seen Kurahashi's defensive shikigami in a long while, aren't they basically professional level? And there are even two!"

"But didn't the Kurahashi family specially create those to conform with her? That's not too unlikely, right?"

"Most defensive shikigami are tailored to conform to the practitioner, doesn't that cost a lot of money? It's incredible of you to go and fight just relying on a wooden sword."

"Ohtomo-sensei is way too random, I even thought he was joking at the start."

The students circled around Harutora, freely chatting about their feelings regarding yesterday, even treating Harutora like he wasn't there.

Just then--

"Huh, Harutora-kun?" One of the few familiar faces came to find him to talk.

It was Tenma. Even if he was surprised at the circumstances Harutora was in, he still instantly noticed the situation and intervened.

"Ahh, T-Tenma....."

Save me - Harutora pleaded wordlessly. Tenma couldn't help but laugh since his appearance was so pitiful.

"Yesterday was really tough on you. But you really surprised me, is your body alright?" He spoke with a casual tone.

"I'm fine, sorry for making you worry."

"Don't say that. But, Harutora-kun, so you had a defensive familiar, huh. And moreover that isn't a familiar sold on the market, right?"

"Uh, yeah....."

"Right! Hey, Tsuchimikado-kun, can you let us see that little shikigami again?"

"Ah, me too! I want to see!"

The girls instantly showed a strong interest upon hearing about the defensive shikigami, and Harutora confusedly sent a questioning gaze at Tenma. Tenma nodded his head with a smile.

".....Kon."

Though she had been ordered to hide herself, Kon was always accompanying Harutora by his side, and she also heard their conversation. The defensive familiar materialized once Harutora summoned her.

"Wah, so cool!"

"Iyah! How cute!"

The classmates' eyes sparkled, especially the girls who were even more abnormally excited, continuously praising Kon as cute and even reaching their hands to touch her. Kon froze stiff facing this sudden atrocity, panic showing in her blue eyes.

"H-H-H-Harutora-sama!?"

".....Forgive me, Kon. Just tolerate it for a bit."

Harutora felt like he was treating Kon like a living sacrifice, and he hid the guilt in his heart. Kon's tail and her pair of small ears stood up in panic, and Harutora could only pretend he hadn't seen it.

"This defensive familiar is really young, now that I'm seeing it from up close. Tsuchimikado, could this be the type that you like?"

"Of course not."

"......I recall she's a high-level shikigami? I see, so you're making this kind of shikigami serve you."

"I said it's not like that!"

"He's panicked, how suspicious."

"Could it be you bath together!"

"Iyah, pervert--"

"......Why don't you understand the words I say."

Perhaps the panicked reactions of the master and servant were very funny, as the students encircling

Harutora laughed one by one. The confusion in Harutora's heart still hadn't disappeared, but the faces in front of him were no longer unreadable and cold like the past two days, and instead there were smiles all around. They were indeed laughing at him, but there was naturally evolved goodwill towards Harutora hidden deep within their words.

"Stupid."

Just then, a voice came from the back of the classroom.

That person spat out a word with a strong provocative air. Harutora turned around to look, and it was another male student whose face he recognized but whose name he didn't know. The male student was overlooking the noisy group around Harutora with his feet up on the desk.

"......Even this guy who doesn't even know what a defensive familiar is has a high-level shikigami serving him? How worthy of a famous family."

The man's tone carried disgust and the clamorous classmates went silent at those words, with the happy and laughter-filled atmosphere from before suddenly freezing.

Harutora hastily called out: "Kon!"

Kon, who had shaken off the female student's hand and leaped up, instantly stopped in midair. Harutora's call obviously wasn't meant for Kon to attack, but was to restrain Kon, to keep her from teaching the rude boy a lesson. Kon had grabbed the hilt of her wakizashi in a backhand grip as if to hunt the prey in front of her, but was stopped. Her dissatisfied "Uuu~" sound was the best proof.

"...Really, do you understand self-reflection or not?"

"B-B, But~"

Harutora narrowed his eyes, staring at the imploring Kon, and Kon's tail dropped in depression.

On the other hand, the male student who had almost been attacked hastily pulled his legs off the desk, almost falling off his chair.

He probably hadn't expected his casual sarcasm to invite a shikigami attack, and his face was rigid from fright.

One of the female students couldn't help but laugh at that boy's panic-stricken appearance. The laughter spread, and not just Harutora's surroundings but the entire classroom filled with the sound of snickering. The student who was being laughed at got angry and embarrassed, his face darkening and reddening.

However... "Sorry." Harutora stood up, bowing deeply to apologize.

The students by his side stared and gaped, stunned at the image of him apologizing. The fur on Kon's tail shot up like needles as if she had taken a strong blow.

"Sorry to bother you, I know I'm an eyesore, but....."

He raised his head, looking straight at the male student who had fallen over in surprise from that action.

"I still want to be good friends with all of you. I also wanted to say this to Kurahashi-san yesterday, but could you please bear with me? I'll do my best to return everyone's consideration."

The classroom was silent.

This was fine. He didn't want to get mad because of a sarcastic remark and shame himself instead. In particular , he could understand the angry feelings with which the other person had spoken.

Kon floated in midair, gazing at her master in astonishment, and the expressions of the classmates circling around Harutora were similar. "Uh, that....." The boy whom Harutora had preemptively apologized to stammered, not knowing how to respond for a while.

The strange silent atmosphere gradually spread.

The girl who had first chatted with Harutora broke the silence. She bucked up her energy, saying cheerfully:

".....You're always talking about others, but weren't you unable to control even the simple shikigami that sensei created in the practical drill the other day? You can't possibly use a defensive shikigami, right?"

"Sh, Shut up. I didn't use my full strength at the time! And also, those methods are different from autonomous control!"

"You say that, but I remember you were exhausted at the end."

"Isn't it always like that at the start! And weren't you unable to stand for quite a while!"

The male student rebutted after the female student had finished speaking. The atmosphere relaxed quite a bit from this since it was obviously ill founded. Harutora felt like he was the one who truly needed to be saved rather than the boy who was being teased by the entire class.

"A, Anyway, Tsuchimikado. You better understand clearly that I can't stand the sight of you or that fight yesterday!"

The boy regained his arrogance, fiercely firing off abusive words again, but the sharp tone from before was no longer audible.

Harutora smiled.

"I'll remember that, and also, you can just call me Harutora."

"....."

The boy turned his head, hmphing in place of a reply.

Harutora didn't hate that way of getting along. He didn't want to force himself to be buddies with everyone, nor was he confident that he could do that. Even if people thought him annoying, he would rather have it said clearly and up-front rather than gossiped about in the shadows.

Harutora turned around, thanking the girl who had rescued him with his eyes.

"Right, I still don't remember everyone's names, so could you take this opportunity to tell me? It's fine if everyone just calls me Harutora."

"Okay, so Tsucchi?"

"You weren't listening to me at all."

Harutora's wry smile made the classroom fill with mirth again. Tenma started off by introducing himself again, and the other students stated their names following him. The boy in the back of the classroom deliberately 'tch'ed, but the corners of his mouth rose slightly.

A new scene had emerged in the classroom.

Kon stared blankly at this scene by herself as if everyone had forgotten about her.

No, it wasn't just Kon, there was someone else--

"......I never thought this kind of development would emerge."

The sudden words made Natsume cry out in surprise, and she was too preoccupied with hastily turning towards the origin of that voice to hide her original, higher-pitched voice.

"T, Touji....."

"Hmph, it would be truly incredible to get these kinds of results if he were doing that on purpose..... But he just went with the flow without doing any planning at all, so the people who can't do such things must be quite jealous after seeing that..."

Saying this, Touji glanced at Natsume.

"...Don't you think so?"

"Wh..... What nonsense are you saying....."

Natsume replied in a soft whisper, turning her head to avoid Touji's gaze.

However, her evasive gaze was naturally drawn to Harutora. Harutora was currently the focus of attention of the people in the class, and Natsume clearly showed surprise and irritation in her eyes as she looked at him.

'Logically speaking', those people had been her classmates for half a year, and 'logically speaking', Harutora was the branch family youngster she had known since she was small.

Both sides were people she recognized, but they had become friends in some way that she couldn't reach out her hand to touch. Natsume gazed silently, and this was the only thing she could do. Her face was inexplicably hurt, and worry managed to flit across Touji's face as he glanced at her.

".....Don't force yourself."

"I, I'm not forcing myself! Why have you full been of nonsense since just now?!"

Natsume shouted agitatedly, audibly forcing herself. Touji shrugged his shoulders, unconcerned.

Then--

"I see, my apologies. Actually, I had a good friend who got into a fight with that idiot this summer because she was forcing herself, and that ended up being the last moment between the two of them."

"......!"

Natsume's heart jumped and she turned to Touji. Touji watched from behind Harutora and the others, his gaze a bit nostalgic, and a self-deprecating smile unlike something he would show emerging on his face.

"That was a bitter experience for me, and I don't want to see it repeat itself."

"....."

Natsume lowered her head, not knowing what to do, her body stiff underneath her uniform.

Her look was scared and extremely stubborn. This timid Natsume looked like an ordinary girl in his eyes

because Touji knew Natsume's true identity. He sighed secretly, raising one eyebrow.

Then, his gaze turned towards the entrance to the room.

Kurahashi Kyouko walked into the room.

Kyouko was also visibly surprised facing the scene in the room, and after understanding the situation, she showed a stunned look. Touji almost laughed. Maybe Harutora was distressed and didn't know how to deal with this person, but in Touji's eyes, her emotions were clearly written on her face and quite easy to understand.

"......I should probably act soon too."

Touji murmured silently. Harutora would definitely look displeased if he heard those words. Because every time Touji was planning some devious idea, his tone was always this raptured.

Part 5

After getting through the morning classes, it was time for the noon break.

"......Can I have some of your time?"

Harutora was originally thinking about how the yuba udon he ate last time was really bad, and this time he was going to change to tempura udon. Just as he was preparing to walk to the school cafeteria, Kyouko who was waiting around called out to him.

The events that had happened yesterday were still vivid, and even Harutora felt it unexpected that she would call out to him. He stayed wary, first quietly warning: "Kon, don't come out." ...He was already adept at controlling his shikigami.

An unwilling presence came from around his feet and Harutora couldn't help but sigh. Even with the defeat they had just experienced yesterday, Kon's fighting spirit seemed undiminished.

...I never noticed that Kon had this kind of fierce personality when she appeared in the dorm......

In the end, he couldn't just keep timidly evading it, and since the effects had already extended this far, he had to resolve it. Harutora therefore replied to Kyouko, who couldn't conceal her surprised look: "alright, no problem," and followed behind her.

Kyouko brought Harutora to an emergency escape stairwell in the back of the academy building. Not only did people not come by this place, they didn't need to worry about being seen either. If it were a normal high school, there would be a very high chance that juvenile delinquents would be squatting in this place to smoke in secret, hiding from the teachers' monitoring.

"......What do you need me for?"

Anyways, Kyouko had definitely come about yesterday's shikigami fight. Harutora had originally thought Kyouko had cooled off after winning the fight, but it seemed that she still wanted to vent some.

Just as Harutora was troubled, thinking that he really wasn't good at dealing with these kinds of stubborn girls, Kyouko suddenly spoke:

"......I'm really sorry about yesterday."

He couldn't help but doubt his own ears.

He gazed at Kyouko, unable to say anything out of surprise. Kyouko's face reddened awkwardly, and she turned her head, her beautiful hair whipping through the air.

".....Even though things ended up like that, I didn't want to bring out my shikigami at first, and all of my resentment was originally directed at Ohtomo-sensei in the first place..... Anyways, I'm really sorry that I made things go out of control."

"No, please don't say that. The entire thing was Kon's fault for suddenly charging out, you don't need to apologize to me....."

Kon's discontent presence came from nearby, and naturally Harutora chose to completely ignore it.

...What was going on?

Could it be that the atmosphere in the classroom had changed, leading to a reversal in her attitude as well? No, his impression of Kyouko definitely wasn't one that would readily yield to whatever changes. Especially

since she had dared to openly challenge Ohtomo and advocate firmly for herself, she wouldn't change her own philosophy even if the entire class sided with Harutora.

Then, her attitude had suddenly reversed into something that could even be called humble courtesy. Harutora was baffled again, and he unavoidably doubted that there was some secret hidden behind this.

...Ugh, but.....

Regardless of what devious ideas Kyouko had behind her back, this was a good opportunity, since he needed to have a proper talk with her.

".....Hey, let me ask, you don't actually hate me, you just want to use me to attack Natsume, isn't that right?"

Strike while the iron is hot, the saying went. He asked straight to the point, and as expected, Kyouko's face pained.

"Why do you want to do that? What reasons do you have?"

".....Those are my personal affairs."

"What personal affairs?"

"You know, when a girl talks about personal affairs, it's polite not to continue asking."

"But you pulled me into your so-called personal affairs , right? I promise I won't tell that person, but do you really hate Natsume that much?"

Kyouko went silent, unable to conceal her own irritation. Harutora waited quietly for her reply, which finally made her sigh in resignation.

".....I met Natsume-kun before, when we were..... very young."

"W, What did you say?"

Harutora was greatly surprised upon hearing the unexpected confession. "Really." Kyouko murmured, twisting her body, a feminine action that seemed extremely cute.

"You don't have to be that surprised. I'm a direct descendant of the Kurahashi family, and Natsume-kun is also from the Tsuchimikado main family."

"Uh..... so you're saying that you met each other because your families are famous?"

Harutora confirmed seriously, but Kyouko's gaze jumped around in astonishment like she had seen an alien.

"Are you serious?"

"W, Why do you ask, did I say something wrong?"

Kyouko sighed deeply, and Harutora felt like he was becoming more and more like a fool.

"Listen carefully. The Kurahashi family was originally a branch family of the Tsuchimikado, we were just named differently from 'Tsuchimikado'. The Kurahashi family separated a long time ago."

Harutora gaped from ear to ear in surprise, only then noticing that he was even more of a fool than he had expected.

"W, Wait! .....What does that mean? Is that for real? Could it be that we're relatives?"

"You don't need to doubt, it's correct that we're relatives."

Harutora shook his head at a loss upon hearing Kyouko reply so straightforwardly.

Then, he asked quietly: "......Kon, did you know that?"

Though he didn't get a response, he clearly felt that Kon was deliberately not replying out of worry for his own feelings. That was a positive answer. The fact that he was clueless when even his own shikigami knew of his family's relationships shocked him greatly.

"Uh..... I, I understand! Never mind the Kurahashi family's business for now - So what? You met Natsume before, so could it be that you had a big fight at the time, and you haven't quelled your resentment even now?"

"......He doesn't remember."

"What?"

"He forgot that we met before."

Kyouko mumbled silently. Harutora closed his mouth without speaking, not because of Kyouko's words, but because of the downcast look on her face.

Only then did Harutora realize that though he had seen Kyouko's stern and angry appearances, it was his first time truly looking at that face. A sudden, unguarded depression had now taken over her face, and Harutora unconsciously panicked.

".....Was your relationship very good back then?"

"We only met once."

"What! Then you can't blame her for not remembering! Wasn't it just something that happened when you were small?"

Indeed, Harutora couldn't have not known of this person if Natsume and Kyouko's child relationship had been intimate enough to leave deep memories. Even if they had been alienated for some time, the two of them had still played together often during elementary school after all.

But--

"I remember very clearly."

Kyouko spoke as if she had been wronged, her look quite grave.

"Because we had a promise....."

"W, What promise?"

"....."

Kyouko didn't reply further. She didn't reveal any words, just a regretful and sorrowful air.

Then, she suddenly cast a doubtful gaze towards Harutora.

".....Let me ask something. After summer vacation, Natsume-san suddenly began using a ribbon to tie his hair, is that....."

"Huh?" Harutora exclaimed, immediately noticing that this problem was extremely troublesome. Not only was that elegant hair Natsume had rare among males, she even tied a ribbon into it, so it was natural that people would doubt.

"Th, Th-Th, That? And that hair, you feel it's like a girl's, right? Actually, there's magic inside it. That ribbon isn't an ordinary ribbon, it's a Tsuchimikado family tool, and so that's why he looks just like a girl even though he's clearly a guy, hahaha."

Harutora lied as he clumsily concealed it with a smile.

Harutora didn't know why Kyouko seemed like she had received a strong blow upon hearing his explanation. "From the Tsuchimikado family....." Her murmur sounded like she was being forced to accept a truth she had long since had a premonition of, but was unwilling to recognize. Harutora didn't get why Kyouko would have this kind of reaction, and he couldn't help but wonder.

Kyouko bit her lip, completely unheeding of the confusion appearing on Harutora's face.

".....I see, so I was right, I knew it would be that."

"W, What do you mean by that?"

"Do I even need to say? Natsume-kun doesn't see anything other than himself and the Tsuchimikado family..... No, his attitude towards Onmyoudou is the

same, in the end everything is to keep from shaming the Tsuchimikado name, that's why he trains his abilities so actively. The Tsuchimikado name is everything in his mind."

"Hey, that's too....."

"What? Am I wrong? Everyone knows this, there's not a single person who can't tell. Maybe you're excluded, but he only came forward to defend you because you were his - the Tsuchimikado family's shikigami - right? Isn't that right?"

She was wrong.

Harutora wanted to deny it, but he couldn't open his mouth.

Natsume who had said 'let's do our best' with a smile, Natsume whose whole body had been shaking out of shame, Natsume who had turned a blind eye to the shikigami battle but who had run over to roar at him after it ended.

He knew Natsume worried about him, but if he were asked why Natsume worried, he wouldn't be able to respond. He believed - he wanted to believe, but his heart stubbornly resisted.

Kyouko gazed solemnly at the silent Harutora, continuing to say:

".....Ato-kun also told me."

"Huh? T, Touji? What did he say....."

"He said you were becoming a shikigami and serving Natsume-kun to obey family tradition. That's why I finally understood why Natsume-kun would choose an outsider like you to be his shikigami. It doesn't have anything to do with whether it benefits him or not, nor has he considered your feelings. He just acts to comply with the Tsuchimikado family tradition, which is the most important thing to him."

Hate. Anger. Regret. Sadness. Those negative emotions were discernible everywhere in her words, completely contrasting with the first impression she gave off of straightforwardness and speaking her mind.

Kyouko looked into Harutora's eyes. What was surprising was that her gaze showed compassion and an intriguing resonance. She pitied herself, and pitied Harutora the same.

...Ah.

That moment, he understood everything.

Kyouko - after listening to Touji's words, believed that Harutora and herself were the 'same' with regard to their relationship to Natsume. Harutora didn't understand the relationship between Kyouko and Natsume, but in her heart, Kyouko had overlapped her relationship with Natsume and Harutora's relationship with Natsume. That was why such a one hundred eighty degree reversal had appeared in her attitude.

But--

"Hold on, you're wrong, Kurahashi."

This time, his tone was natural and sincere without a trace of hesitation, and that strength made Kyouko come to her senses.

"......What?'

"You're wrong, I was the one who asked that person to let me become his shikigami."

Kyouko's eyes widened in disbelief.

"Liar."

"I'm not lying. Maybe it's not very convincing that an outsider like me deliberately chose this unsuitable road..... But it was indeed me who took the initiative to ask. That person refused at the start, believing that there was too much risk, and only permitted me to walk a similar path because of my persistence."

"....."

Kyouko's gaze was filled with doubt. Harutora didn't lie, every single word he said was true, and Kyouko should be able to understand. He hoped that Kyouko could understand.

"That person indeed has some intricate, complex feelings towards the Tsuchimikado name..... Like he's proud of it and pressured by it, and sometimes he suffers because of it. But he doesn't get carried away by it, can you please believe this?"

He wanted to peacefully coexist with everyone, of course including Kyouko, and it would be best if Natsume could join in. No, Natsume definitely had to be included.

Even if he was a useless shikigami, maybe this - creating a 'place for Natsume' - was truly the strongest magic that Harutora could cast for his master.

".....What, if you say that, I....."

Kyouko spoke angrily, her gaze dropping to her feet.

"In the end it was just my unrequited love? I was just simply forgotten?"

"Huh? No..... I....."

He hadn't meant that. Before he finished speaking, another voice shifted the pair's attention.

".....What are you two doing?"

That voice was cold and hardened, like armor crafted out of thick steel.

"Natsume?"

Natsume walked up the emergency stairwell, looking at the abnormally gloomy faces on the stairs.

"What are you doing in this place? Shouldn't your dispute have ended already in yesterday's fight?"

"Ah, no, you're wrong, Natsume. We're not fighting--"

Harutora hurriedly explained, but Kyouko suddenly cut off his words.

"He's right, we've already made up." She spoke expressionlessly.

".....Made up?"

"Right, the Tsuchimikado and Kurahashi were originally one family. The misunderstanding between us has been resolved, and now we're just chatting agreeably as members of Tsuchimikado branch families."

Kyouko's voice was slightly stubborn, a vicious provocation completely opposite from the contents of her words, and Harutora hurriedly came forward to smooth things over.

"That's true, Natsume, I didn't know she was originally related to me, how could you not tell me such a thing earlier, haha....."

"....."

Natsume silently looked back and forth between the two on the staircase, and Harutora didn't notice that her lips were slightly trembling.

"....Noon break is almost over, return to the classroom soon."

Natsume suddenly turned around with a cold attitude, and it really was indiscernible whether she had accepted Harutora and Kyouko's explanations. Harutora hastily called out to Natsume: "Wait."

This was a good opportunity.

Though he had only chatted a bit, he had noticed that Kyouko's hostility to Natsume wasn't simple jealousy or a desire for superiority. In that case, they should at the least deepen their understanding of each other even if they couldn't instantly make up. Natsume had expressed herself that she didn't understand why Kyouko opposed

her so much. Maybe they could more or less improve the thorny relationship between them if they understood more about each other.

"Don't be that cold. We fought yesterday, but after chatting just now, I learned that she did some introspection, and she even came just to apologize, right? "

Harutora desperately explained for Kyouko. Kyouko didn't say a thing, her expression complex, but Harutora was infinitely grateful to her just for not opening her mouth to say something reckless.

"Didn't you say that you actually didn't particularly hate Kurahashi? Moreover, what she says is actually reasonable, and if you guys just calmly sat down to talk, maybe this situation could be simply--"

"You also talked very energetically with the other students this morning." Natsume heard Harutora speaking more and more excitedly as she was leaving, and stopped to speak without even turning around.

"Oh, that, I didn't understand what in the world was going on at first, but I only noticed after talking that everyone's no different from ordinary people. Their

preconceptions of the Tsuchimikado aren't as deep as in the past, and they even agreed to let me ask as much as I needed if there were parts of the curriculum that I didn't understand--"

"--That's....."

"What?"

"That's - fawning over the people around you, winning everyone's goodwill, are those the methods you spoke about yesterday?"

The emptiness in that tone made his hair stand on end.

Harutora was stunned the moment he heard this, without even time to be filled with surprise, astonishment, or even anger. He had never even dreamed that Natsume would say those kinds of words, and after hearing this, Kyouko also seemed stunned as she gazed at Natsume.

Natsume slowly turned around.

"How many times do I need to tell you to understand, Harutora? Your progress is far behind the other students, and you won't catch up to them even if you flatter them. Why can't you understand this?"

A deliberately repressed tough tone, and a look simmering with anger.

"Onmyoudou isn't for being happy with everyone, and this place is different from your ordinary high school from before. If you have time to fool around with the students in your class and chat with Kurahashi-san, why don't you train yourself more."

Natsume spoke gravely and sincerely, seeming lamentable.

"Wh--"

The emotions suppressed in his heart could no longer be held back, and they exploded from Harutora's mouth in a burst.

"What are you joking about! Natsume, who are you trying to fool with that high-and-mighty attitude!"

He yelled in a rage.

Harutora's roared and his anger flared in a blaze. Natsume took a step back as if she were being attacked by a storm, and even Kyouko's body went stiff. But, Harutora didn't stop shouting, with no intention at all of shutting up.

"You're shy, so you look down on other people getting along? A brat who even has trouble communicating with other people dares to talk big like that!"

"Wha.....!'

Natsume went speechless for a while as if she had been pummeled viciously. Harutora's anger couldn't be taken back after being released.

"I also know that my progress is behind and that I'm an outsider who knows nothing at all about Onmyoudou . But because of this, what's wrong with relying on those around me and asking everyone to help me out? Cooperating with the other students and working hard together is also a very good method! You can't do it - don't think you're incredible and disdain other people just because you don't have the courage!"

He thundered, unable to recall how long it had been since he had yelled this angrily at someone else. It seemed as if even the air in his body was being squeezed, and he couldn't stop shaking.

However, he had to speak out. He was angry at Natsume's opinion, irritated that his hard work wasn't well received, and couldn't just casually gloss it over with a smile or complaints.

Under the intense onslaught of Harutora's erupting emotions, Natsume's face paled, seeming like her soul had been stolen away by that violent momentum.

"Cooperating with the other students... Courage..."

She gazed at Harutora blankly, her mouth mumbling and a faint light emerging in the corner of her eyes.

"Those kinds of things... I don't need Harutora-kun to tell me about those things."

"......!"

Natsume stumbled, leaving Harutora's side with unsteady steps.

"Tsuchimikado-kun, why are you in this kind of place? The time we agreed on is already--" A suit-wearing young man stuck his head out of the same place Natsume had appeared from.

Harutora remembered this man. It was the young man who had searched for Natsume the previous day during noon break and after class in the name of special classes. He was surprised when he saw Natsume on the stairs, and was clearly anxious upon noticing the sinister atmosphere there.

Then, Natsume lowered her head, turning her back to Harutora

She walked down the stairs, her feet banging on the steps, and passed by the confused young man, vanishing into the academy building.

The young man looked between Natsume as she walked into the floor of the academy and Harutora on the stairs with a hesitant appearance. In the end, he still called out: "...wait up," and departed to chase after Natsume.

Only Harutora and Kyouko were left there.

".....Damn."

The exhausting feeling of a big hole opening in his chest assaulted Harutora after venting his emotions.

...That person.....

Natsume had forgotten about the family tradition that she had to pose as a male in her last words, and had reverted to an undisguised female. The flash of her true self from underneath her male disguise continuously tormented Harutora's heart.

".....Hey....."

Kyouko who had ended up watching the situation unfold from the side asked gingerly:

"I, I might be in no position to say this, but..... Is it alright for you to not go after him?"

She asked with a shaken heart, like she was touching something broken. Harutora didn't reply. He couldn't reply.

Only then did the bell announcing the end of the noon break slowly ring, as if it were half a beat too slow.

"Tsuchimikado-kun - Natsume-kun! Wait up."

He quickly chased after Natsume who ran through the halls like she was fleeing. But, she still moved forward without turning around even if his voice called out to her from behind.

He had hurriedly gone searching around everywhere since Natsume still hadn't showed up even when their agreed-upon time had passed, and as a result had happened upon that scene. The person in the stairwell just now had been the shikigami he had seen yesterday. They had probably fought. Natsume's small back trembled with her breathing.

He couldn't help but sigh.

On one hand, he pitied Natsume, and on the other hand he was filled with an unpleasant feeling from seeing that ugly scene. His mind understood this was unalterable, but he felt pained from the great king's immaturity and ugly appearance. In particular, this was all the fault of that worthless shikigami, which pushed him over the limits of his tolerance.

"......There's no choice."

"Right, no need to wait any longer."

He could no longer tolerate it, and that callous tone different from the usual made Natsume stop in surprise.

"Natsume-kun, there's actually no need for you to be troubled by such a small thing. Let's begin now, even though it's premature." He spoke to Natsume.

"Wh, What are you saying?"

Natsume finally turned around to face the man.

Even though her heart was wavering, she was on alert, but unfortunately her reaction was still too slow. The quarrel with her shikigami was still hanging over her head, leading to her being unable to change her mood in that instant. What an immature action, but he wouldn't have to endure it in the future. He rapidly took out a charm.

"Stupefy, seal, bind. Order."

The charm flew out from his fingers, making Natsume momentarily unconscious. He stuck both hands into his

pants pockets, snorting as he overlooked the collapsed Natsume.

"Should have done this long ago."

"Don't be impatient, next is the real highlight."

Would taking this person away impede the 'education' later? Moreover, regardless of how Natsume complained, that young shikigami was definitely his pillar of support, and they had to resolve that recipe for disaster as soon as possible.

"In any case, it's an eyesore to just leave alone."

"I understand. Leave things to me to deal with."

A cold smile emerged on his face as he said this.

Chapter 4 - Kodoku

Part 1

Natsume didn't show up for the afternoon classes.

Harutora was currently still in the classroom, about one hour after the afternoon classes had ended.

He frowned listlessly, an appearance doomed to repetition, his fierce eyes like those of an intolerably hungry, fasting tiger. Kon hadn't materialized, but if she did, she would definitely feel deeply anxious because of the awkwardness.

Almost no other students could be seen in the classroom. Other than Harutora, there were only two people staying behind in the classroom. One was Touji, and the other was Kyouko, unexpectedly enough.

Touji sat in a seat two seats away from Harutora, his back to the chair with his feet propped on the desk, unmoving so that it was impossible to see whether he was awake or asleep. Kyouko was sitting in a seat farther away from the other two with her cell phone screen flipped open, constantly pressing buttons and trying her

best to show an unconcerned appearance as if this had nothing to do with her. However, she didn't leave first, but instead stayed behind in the classroom.

They were all waiting for Natsume to return to the classroom.

The three of them hadn't talked much, and a heavy atmosphere hung over the vast classroom, permeating out from Harutora as its center.

The sound of a door opening rang out and the door to the classroom opened.

The clueless Tenma hastily jumped back in surprise once he walked into the classroom. He seemed to have believed that no one was left inside the classroom, and the group of people staying inside also surprised him. In particular, the gazes that shot at him as soon as the door opened surprised him so much that he almost withdrew and fled the scene.

".....Wh, What are you doing? And you three..... Why are you all together?"

"Nothing."

Tenma asked nervously, and Harutora coldly replied to him. But it was fortunate for Tenma that there was even someone willing to respond to him, as Touji didn't react and Kyouko ignored his question. He felt like he had entered a dangerous and sensitive area, straining the kind smile on his face.

"I, I see..... Ah, but it's perfect that Harutora-kun is in the classroom, Ohtomo-sensei actually gave me this just now and told me to give it to you."

"To me?"

Tenma held a long, two-meter long rod in his hand, and one end was set with a metal tip, with a metal hoop on the other end, the hoop passing through six other smaller rings like the shakujou[12] a monk or practitioner would carry while traveling.

Harutora felt shocked, surprise all over his face, and Touji and Kyouko's gazes clearly showed great interest after taking in the shakujou one after another.

".....What's that?"

"It's a shakujou, have you never seen one before?"

"I've seen one, but why are you giving this kind of thing....."

"Didn't that wooden sword from yesterday break? Sensei wanted you to use this instead."

"Hey, could he mean that he wants me to have more shikigami battles?"

"I don't think so..... Sensei was probably dissatisfied that the wooden sword somehow broke, so he wanted to take revenge."

Tenma said this while tilting his head, looking like he wasn't very confident.

Indeed, after the fight yesterday had ended, Ohtomo had taken the wooden sword (wreckage) that he had enchanted himself, muttering: "This is way too ridiculous !" It seemed that he hadn't expected the wooden sword to come to such a tragic end. Even so, Harutora still didn't get where the significance of revenge came in.

".....So annoying."

Harutora frowned, taking the shakujou from Tenma's hands.

The shakujou was heavy, but maybe its balance was good, since it was easier to handle than the impression its exterior gave off.

But even if he accepted this kind of thing, not only would it occupy more space, it would just create more trouble. He didn't have many things right now so it didn't matter, but there wasn't actually much space in his dorm room.

"Sensei wanted me to give it to you as soon as possible, could it be that he already knew you were still in the classroom?"

"He already..... Why would he know? I didn't run into him."

"I, I don't know that. But speaking of that, why are you and the others still in the classroom, Harutora-kun?"

Tenma asked Harutora, no malice at all discernable in his tone. Harutora puffed out his cheeks upon hearing that like a child losing his temper.

"Natsume didn't come to class in the afternoon, right?" Touji leisurely replied from the side.

"Ah, right, that's very curious. This should be the first time Natsume-kun has skipped class, right?"

"It seems like he had a fight with this idiot. Kurahashi was there at the time."

"R, Really?"

Tenma looked at Kyouko who was sitting farther away . Since the memories of what had happened the past two days were still fresh, the look Tenma gave Kyouko was obviously a bit surprised. Even if she had become the focus of the topic, Kyouko still stubbornly stared at her cell phone screen, refusing to raise her head.

"What do you mean cutting class, I thought he was going to those special classes. That suit-wearing man came to get him again before I left." Harutora spoke, his anger still not fully disappeared.

"Special classes? What are those?"

"You didn't know? That person always disappears somewhere during breaks and after class ends, the teacher even specially comes to receive him."

Tenma still had a wondering face after Harutora's explanation. But once he said "The person who asked you to notify us about him on the first day!" Tenma made a "huh?" sound and was extremely surprised for some reason.

"H, Hold on, Harutora-kun, that was--"

Tenma was about to hastily open his mouth to explain, but Kyouko who had been standing fast to her silence suddenly interrupted.

".....Let me first explain, that person just now wasn't a teacher, he was a Mystical Investigator."

"Mystical Investigator? You mean the Onmyou Agency Mystical Investigator?"

"Are there any other Mystical Investigators?"

Kyouko replied coldly. Harutora's face sank, and Touji took his feet off the table as if he smelled a dangerous air, sitting up in his chair.

"Why would a Mystical Investigator come over and over to look for Natsume?" Harutora asked, his face still serious.

"The Mystical Investigator came to investigate the incident that happened before."

"The incident that happened before? What do you mean what happened before?"

Could it be that the Mystical Investigator had come about Dairenji Suzuka? But that incident shouldn't have been made public. Harutora asked, not understanding, and Kyouko and Tenma unwittingly both showed the same surprise upon hearing that.

"Harutora-kun, could it be that you didn't hear about it ?"

"Hear about what?"

"......What's going on, aren't you his shikigami? What's up with you two?"

"Hurry up and tell me what exactly happened!"

The two of them both knew about what had happened to Natsume, and he was the only one in the dark. That fact annoyed Harutora, and he thundered, agitatedly standing up from his seat.

At the same time--

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon suddenly materialized on the desk in front of Harutora.

Why was that? ...The moment Harutora's drive was weakened, a crashing sound like an explosion rang out and the window between the classroom and the corridor shattered, scattering everywhere.

The four of them didn't get what had happened for a while and just gasped, frozen and unable to move from where they were. Only Kon showed wariness on her face , drawing the wakizashi from her waist.

Kon's wide eyes looked - upwards.

There was some giant, writhing creature above the frozen four people and Kon who had taken a stance.

It was a hazy, dark cloud. A big cloud of fog that wasn't mist or smoke constantly writhed, spreading out as if planning on covering the ceiling of the classroom, like the thundercloud of a storm - no, it was moving its body gruesomely like a living creature. This cloud of fog was what had broken the window and rushed into the room.

Harutora and the others were scared into a panic upon seeing this.

"Wh, What is that? Hey, Tenma, do you know?"

"I, I don't know! I've never seen that thing!"

"Tenma, does the Onmyou Academy raise even these kinds of things too?"

"I don't know! Why do you always ask me!?"

The cloud of fog moved quite intensely. On the outside it looked grayish white, but a gas black as ink writhed inside it, with dark-red tendrils flowing around covering its entire body. In addition, it would often burst in a spasm, scattering sparks and flashing with light.

That appearance was like an erupting volcano belching out smoke, but also like a never-before-seen deep-sea creature, or even like a hideous chimera doing a crazy dance. The strangest part was its texture, as that thing's outer form was like fog floating in midair yet it gave off a weight as if mud or dirt, this mass being what had broken the window.

".....A kodoku[13]."

Kyouko spoke as she stared upwards, and the other three boys simultaneously turned to face her.

"This thing is a kodoku?"

Touji quickly spoke up to confirm, and Kyouko nodded while staring intently at the gas, her face pale.

The kodoku was quite a mainstream curse in many different Onmyoudou styles. It used bugs like spiders or centipedes as a vessel. By placing a large amount of them in a pot-like tool, they were made to kill each other until the last one remaining was the strongest individual. This bug was used to perform the kodoku, namely as the

sacrifice to serve as the vessel. By infusing it with the magical energy of the curse, it would become a type of shikigami.

"I, In other words, this thing counts as a shikigami?"

"Right..... And it's even a clearly banned magic."

The kodoku had been designated as a 'curse-type' shikigami in 'General-style', and without the Onmyou Agency's consent, Onmyou law strictly prohibited its creation and use.

"B, But this is too strange! There's a barrier around the entire academy building, so even a shikigami shouldn't be able to force its way in!"

Harutora remembered Alpha and Omega from Tenma's panicked voice. Could it be that this shikigami had destroyed those komainu guards?

Just then--

The center of the fog expanded, splitting into two halves, a giant eyeball emerging from within. The eyeball moved around fluidly, finally settling down on the bottom, right above Harutora.

Horror ran through Harutora's entire body, and Touji's eyes flashed with a sharp light, with Kyouko and Tenma letting out screams.

"Harutora-sama, please stay back!"

Kon shouted and leaped upwards, and the floating fog sticking towards the ceiling moved accordingly.

The fog began descending bit by bit, pieces of it dripping off like rain. The dropping fog drew out irregular paths in midair, successively attacking Harutora and the others.

"Uwah! It's coming!"

"Tch - H, Hakuou! Kokfuu!"

Kyouko's defensive shikigami materialized a step behind Kon who had reacted first, leaping off the desk and neatly slashing their katana and spear, slicing up the fog that came continuously. Kon also used her big tail for balance as she moved through the air as if dancing, scattering the constantly attacking fog with her wakizashi.

The fog that had been attacked showed the 'lag' phenomenon, its contour distorting and fragments flickering in midair. But after it was cut apart, the fog quickly merged back with the big cloud of fog on the ceiling, and the most important main body showed no signs of weakening.

"Kon! Be careful!"

"Please do not worry - Iyaaaah, it touched my t-t-t-tail!
"

"U, Uwah! Aah! Save me!"

"Shut up, Tenma! Hurry up and help!"

"......No good, my phone won't connect, how thoughtful of them....."

The classroom became a battlefield in moments, and it was a tangled battle. The four of them hurriedly came together and held their ground, using the three shikigami as a shield to combat the kodoku. However, they were pushed back step by step by the gradually increasing fog that pressed forth, and finally retreated to the wall on the other side of the corridor.

"Really, it's practically endless."

Touji frowned. Harutora angrily went "damn", trying to open the window behind his back. He unlocked it, but the window wouldn't budge no matter what, as if it were stuck.

"The window won't open! Why is it like that?"

"That's bad! There's a barrier, when was it set.....!"

Kyouko turned around to size up the window and called out lightly. As she spoke, magical energy that covered not only the window, but also the entire surrounding classroom, visibly flowed. It seemed like they had been closed off inside the classroom.

Touji grabbed a chair, smashing it into the window without saying anything. Kyouko and Tenma flinched in surprise, but the chair smashed into the window was easily bounced back. It seemed that it couldn't be damaged physically.

"Can't smash it open, huh..... Kurahashi, do you have any way of destroying this barrier?"

"H, Hold on! Can't you see that I'm incredibly busy!"

The kodoku's assault didn't seem to be slowing, and the amount of fog was tremendous, and it couldn't be handled just relying on Kon and the two Yaksha.

"Damn, is no one still inside the academy building? Why doesn't anyone notice this commotion!"

"Th, The problem is the barrier, sound won't get outside no matter how noisy we are inside the barrier!"

"Tenma! If you have spare time to explain, come over here and help! Those two new students are useless amateurs."

Kyouko's expression was hurried, but the situation was quite dangerous. Her face paled as she focused on controlling the shikigami, and large drops of sweat seeped from her forehead.

Tenma hurriedly took charms out from a charm box, but his hand slipped because his movements were too choppy and the charms scattered to the floor. He floundered in panic for a moment, then hurriedly picked up the charms from the floor.

As he was picking up the charms, the fog dodged around the shikigami's blades.

A cloud of fog deftly avoided Kokfuu's spear, rushing towards Harutora. Harutora readily raised the shakujou in his hands, but Kyouko 'tch'ed and took out a charm from her charm box a step earlier.

She used a protection charm. The charm gave off a weak light and the attacking fog made a noise. In that moment, the smell of burning wafted out, and the fog dissipated as the protective charm burned it up.

"Th, Thanks."

"Shut up, don't talk to me!"

Tenma had finally picked up his charms and now stammered incantations, throwing the charms at the fog. However, the fog had now spread everywhere in the classroom, and though in the end a single cloud didn't pose much threat, their chance of victory wasn't great since there was a mob of them.

"......This thing's goal should be Harutora." At that time , Touji, who had been engrossed in watching the battle from the window, spoke up.

"M, Me?"

"It looks like it, from its movements."

Kyouko and Tenma who were standing in the front quickly exchanged glances upon hearing those words.

"Could it be Yakou fanatics again.....?"

"It's very possible..... Ugh! What a joke!"

The pair's conversation also reached Harutora's and Touji's ears.

The first day he had entered the principal had spoken about Yakou fanatics, but what was the relationship between Yakou worshippers and this kodoku?

"What's going on!? Do you two know something?"

Harutora asked urgently from behind. Kyouko's face sank, and she glanced at Tenma next to her like she was giving him the responsibility of explaining.

Tenma helplessly opened his mouth:

"Harutora-kun, well, you know..... Natsume-kun is Yakou's....."

"Oh, you're talking about that rumor, of course I know. So you guys are clear about it too, huh."

The principal had given an explanation that touched lightly upon that subject. "So then what?" Tenma showed an ashamed expression as Harutora urged him on, continuing to explain:

".....Actually, two days before you guys entered, a fanatic who had heard Natsume-kun's rumor ambushed him on his way to school, trying to come in contact with him. He seemed like a very tough person, and in the end he even planned on a forced kidnapping, resulting in both sides using magic."

"What did you say? Two days before we came here?"

Though there had long since been rumors about Yakou fanatics looking for Natsume, he hadn't expected an incident to have happened so recently.

"Yeah." Tenma nodded at the shocked Harutora. " Didn't I just say a Mystical Investigator came here to do an investigation? It was to investigate that incident. I heard that there was a big group of accomplices backing that fanatic at the time."

Harutora was stunned. Such a big thing had happened , but he hadn't even heard a whisper of it.

"B, But, don't Yakou fanatics worship Yakou? Why would they do that? Especially if they truly believe Natsume is Yakou, they wouldn't use a kodoku!"

"Hmph! How can we make sense of those crazy fanatics' thoughts! Also, though the fanatic from before was subdued by teachers who rushed over, he was shouting some words like 'I came to help Yakou awaken' without giving up."

"No way.....!"

In that case, the companions of the fanatic from that time had released the kodoku to make Natsume awaken

as Yakou? That really couldn't be called worship, it was simply a twisted and one-sided crazy faith.

"Damn, what 'special classes'! Why did that person lie to us?"

"I think..... He probably didn't want you who had just entered to worry too much."

Tenma replied conclusively. Maybe things were truly as he said, but even if they weren't, Harutora was already so busy with dealing with his own situation that his mind was spinning, so no wonder Natsume would be so apprehensive and deliberately conceal it.

...'Harutora, Touji, let's do our best.'

Back then, Natsume had said that with a smile and left her seat. She hadn't left to go to some special classes, but to guard against fanatics who were eyeing her and to talk about future countermeasures with the Mystical Investigator pursuing the case. Harutora couldn't help but get angry, half at Natsume who had burdened herself with everything, and the other half at himself for not noticing the abnormal situation.

Then, Harutora came back to his senses.

"......Hold on, what about Natsume? Could something be happening to Natsume right now?"

Tenma let out an 'ah' as Harutora said this, his face paling.

Since the opponents had used the kodoku to deal with the shikigami Harutora, Natsume couldn't be untouched.

Moreover, Natsume hadn't come to class in the afternoon. Even if she was talking about countermeasures with the Mystical Investigator, and even if it was right after she had fought fiercely with Harutora, she had showed up in class the previous two days. Could she have skipped class today because something had happened to make her unable to come?

Kyouko hurriedly glanced at the pale Harutora.

"......Harutora-kun, didn't you just reproach Natsume-kun for not having the courage to talk to the people around him?"

"That....."

"Don't you think that you can't fault him for that? Everyone believes he's Yakou's reincarnation, and when you add the crazy fanatics circling around him, not only would people be unwilling to take the initiative to approach him, he'd obviously hesitate for fear of bringing trouble to others."

"....."

Harutora bit his lower lip, not even noticing that he bit so hard that it bled.

...'I don't need Harutora-kun to tell me about those things.'

No wonder she would respond like that. He was a shikigami and a childhood friend who knew her secret better than anybody, but had come out to attack her biggest irresolvable weak point. She would definitely feel even more pained and uncomfortable upon hearing those words come out of his mouth.

He understood - it was a fact that he had borne in his heart before entering the Academy, but he had neglected it. Since he couldn't keep up with the coursework, he had tossed the things important enough that the principal

had told him three times out of his mind, mustering his strength in order to let himself have a place in the class.

Actually, Harutora was the one whose mind was full of only himself, not Natsume.

"......Natsume."

Jangle - the small loops on the top of the shakujou made noise.

Kyouko, Tenma, and even Kon turned around in surprise - towards Harutora's position.

Harutora was too busy to care about what kind of expression appeared on their faces.

"...Kon, move aside."

"H-Harutora-sama? But....."

"Hurry up and move aside."

Harutora barked again, and Kon threw off her hesitation, dodging to the side. Harutora grasped the shakujou, immediately advancing towards the gap ahead .

The fog rapidly attacked, but was fended off by Harutora nimbly swinging the shakujou forward. A 'lag' reaction appeared for a moment, and it split apart.

"H, Hold on, why are you doing this again--!"

This was different from the fight, it wasn't a game. Kyouko couldn't say those words to stop him because that natural counsel couldn't keep up with Harutora's advancing back.

Harutora brandished the shakujou, raining blows on the fog with an imposing figure that even rivaled Hakuou and Kokfuu - his momentum was even greater than the two of them.

Kyouko and Tenma couldn't help but gasp.

"......Kurahashi, Tenma, sorry for getting you involved. " Harutora spoke without even turning around.

"D, Don't be....."

"But please, help me out just this once, and I'll apologize seriously to you later. Please help me beat back this thing and find Natsume."

Harutora pleaded.

Tenma shivered and clearly nodded his head to reply.

Kyouko chewed on her lip.

"......Since we'll die if we don't fight back, that's all we can do." She replied impatiently, a proud smile emerging on her face. "Sorry." Harutora apologized to the two of them again.

"Things should be easier this way. Actually, I have an idea, but I don't know if it'll work, so I'd like to ask the seniors to offer their opinion." Touji calmly spoke with a low voice as he watched.

Part 2

When Natsume regained consciousness, she was lying on the ground with both her hands tied behind her back and the ankles of her feet also tied with rope.

She couldn't make sense of the situation for some time, widening her eyes and raising her body.

".....The magic practice field?"

Natsume happened to be lying on the arena where the shikigami battle had been held yesterday.

Why - once she thought this, the memories from before she lost consciousness instantly awoke.

"Ah, you're finally awake."

The suit-wearing Mystical Investigator stood to the side, speaking while gazing at Natsume who lay on the ground.

"You.....!"

"Oh, shout and yell as much as you please, it doesn't matter since the sound won't reach above. But I implore you to not act rashly for your reputation's sake."

The Mystical Investigator showed a cold smile, respectfully bowing towards Natsume on the ground.

"First, I should apologize for the incident a few days ago. My comrade became impatient and did something undignified. Though, I'm not too willing to call that person a 'comrade', even if he holds the same respectful

attitude as I, as our ambitions are inconsistent, in particular since the difference in our abilities is too great. "

Natsume couldn't help but doubt her own ears upon hearing the Mystical Investigator's words. When 'the incident a few days ago' was mentioned, she could only think of one person, the Yakou fanatic who had appeared before her before Harutora and Touji entered the academy.

"It would be fine if that person had just done his duty properly, but unfortunately he grew restless upon hearing of your outstanding performance. Not that I don't understand his feelings, as in the end, my heart is also jumping for joy."

The Mystical Investigator snickered, his appearance simply seeming like a different person's compared to the young man she had become familiar with, who had come to investigate after she had been attacked by the Yakou fanatic. The displeasure and anger from being tricked made Natsume's white face swiftly flush red.

"You called that man a comrade, so could you also be... ..."

"Correct."

The Mystical Investigator became polite again, bowing proudly like a child.

"I am truly honored to be able to pay tribute to your true self like this. Heir to the Tsuchimikado family, Tsuchimikado Natsume-sama, my great King of the North Star."

Natsume moaned in despair.

The North Star King was the moniker that fanatics worshipped him by. The North Star referred to Polaris[14], which occupied an important position in Onmyoudou. Those people compared Polaris to 'the night's radiance', and hence Yakou[15], and they deemed their master a king in imitation of his retainers Hishamaru and Kakugyouki, thereby spawning a nickname. Of course, Yakou himself never referred to himself as such, and because of this there were very few people who called him the 'North Star King'.

"Why!?"

Natsume still felt it hard to believe, unable to hold back her shout.

"You're a true Mystical Investigator belonging to the Onmyou Agency! Why would you be together with that kind of person like a Yakou fanatic--?"

"It's not to proper to address your own believer as 'that kind of person', so could you please retract that manner of speaking? In particular, you don't need to be surprised , there are quite a few worshippers of the North Star King in the Onmyou Agency."

"Liar!"

"You think I'm lying? Actually, isn't such a situation natural? How do normal people who don't understand magic criticize the King of the North Star? Only people who are versed in Onmyoudou can understand his greatness, and there is no place in the world with deeper relations to magic than the Onmyou Agency, isn't that right?"

The Mystical Investigator spoke regally. Natsume felt a great shock, since his explanation sounded extremely convincing.

The Onmyou Agency could be said to be the modern Japan's Onmyou Bureau - the headquarters of Onmyouji. But at the same time, the Onmyou Agency was also the lair of Yakou fanatics, which was no small matter. Even if there weren't many, they might bring huge effects to the magic community someday if their true identities weren't exposed.

"However, the vast majority of people currently related to magic enjoy the grace of the North Star King's undertakings, yet they bury the North Star King, seeing his existence as taboo. Far too foolish! How could those actions be anything but ungrateful? I wait to correct that mistake as soon as possible and revert the king's improperly disparaged reputation."

The Mystical Investigator spoke and suddenly stared unblinkingly at Natsume. His gaze was hot and eager. He walked in front of her, slowly kneeling to the ground.

"I wait to atone before the great king, for forcing you to descend to this world again to clear his own stigma..... That is truly a great insult, and thus I am disgraced. But now, I only wish to kneel before you as soon as possible

and ask that you forgive my indolence and permit that I offer my entire services to my king's future greatness..... You came for this, right, Yakou-sama?"

The Mystical Investigator peered into Natsume's eyes, apologizing reverently.

The young man used exaggerated speech and motions, pure faith showing in his eyes. That faith was completely distorted - insane.

A chill ran through her body and the illusion of her body temperature dropping straight down assaulted Natsume. She was glad that she was lying on the ground, as if she had been standing, she might have collapsed to the ground from her trembling legs.

Because of the rumors about Yakou's reincarnation, she had suffered quite a bit of scorn and had been feared ever since she had been born. She had often even been forced to bear impossibly high expectations.

But among all of those emotions of the people who had seen her as Yakou, never once had this kind of ' affection' showed up that made her so terrified and physically sick. She felt like her teeth were chattering and desperately clenched her jaws.

"I..... I'm not Yakou....."

Natsume muttered, opening her mouth to letting out the fear and filth from her heart.

With those words, the young man's face momentarily changed. He no longer showed the proper, upright appearance like before, but instead he gave off an appalling air, his dark face giving off an extremely narrow, distorted belief filled with prejudice.

But, he quickly regained his calm and even forced a good-intentioned smile, slowly standing up.

"Natsume-kun, I can reach confidential information that is not revealed to the public due to my identity. I'm very clear on what happened. The 'Child Prodigy' Dairenji Suzuka and the 'Armored Juggernaut' both showed up, right?"

"Wha....."

Natsume's eyes widened in surprise as the summer incident was suddenly mentioned again. The Mystical Investigator couldn't help but grin at that reaction.

"Do you understand my feelings when I heard that report? Not just me, my comrades were all ecstatic. Many years before, there were rumors indicating that you were the North Star King's reincarnation, but after receiving that report, we finally had proof of the rumor's truth! If you remember, I said that one comrade among us couldn't help but take early action because he heard of your outstanding performance, right? Now, we have already distanced ourselves from our lengthy hiding and have made various preparations to welcome your awakening. We have waited for the moment the North Star King awakens for a long time, the days creeping by like years!"

The Mystical Investigator spoke glowingly with zeal.

Natsume was shocked again. The incident with Dairenji Suzuka was an important 'turning point' in her life and she couldn't forget about it even if she wanted to, but now it was a 'past event' that had 'already ended'. She had never dreamed that this incident would lead to a great uproar in a place that she didn't know of.

But--

"That wasn't done by my strength alone."

Natsume murmured quietly. As if he hadn't heard clearly, the Mystical Investigator asked: "What did you say?"

"That incident wasn't resolved by just my strength alone. It wasn't me who defeated the Armored Juggernaut and stopped Dairenji Suzuka by myself, it was Harutora and I - we were only able to successfully resolve it by combining our two strengths. We were only able to achieve such surprising results because we combined our two individual strengths. You say you were 'very clear'? How laughable, you don't know anything at all! Don't think that you can make a conclusion about Harutora and I by just relying on your own selfish conjectures."

"You, that.....!"

The pleasure on the Mystical Investigator's face shattered.

The dark face that had flitted across him just now showed from underneath his pleased expression. A callous face appeared along with violent spasms in his shoulders and hands like he was shivering from cold.

"Ignorant..... Far too ignorant and clueless..... This is the king? Unbelievable..... Unreasonable..... This is.....!"

The Mystical Investigator's proper appearance twisted into something inhuman, like a severe lunatic.

But, regardless of what kind of grave shocks his faith received, he was still a Mystical Investigator. He forcefully suppressed his agitated feelings, muttering fiercely.

"Hah! The King hasn't awakened, I cannot act with undue haste and improperly attempt to speak directly with the king. But Natsume-kun, let me tell you something to help you awaken. That brat you seem to call Harutora should be currently breathing his last due to the kodoku that I released!"

The Mystical Investigator hurled those words with a vicious tone, and only then did Natsume truly feel like her body temperature had actually dropped rapidly.

She reflexively searched for Harutora's aura. A 'link' of spiritual power had been created between them ever since she had gifted him with the spirit-seeing ability and allowed him to become her shikigami. Natsume could

feel Harutora's presence however far the two were from each other.

But, she finally noticed that her strength had been sealed when she tried to search for aura.

Four charms had been stuck on to her chest, shoulders, and back, and their use was to restrain her spiritual power. With that, she was powerless, unable to even summon her servant shikigami Hokuto since she couldn't use magic.

"Did you only notice that now? How truly careless. What's more, what do you think this place is? This is the magical practice field, and the center of the arena, right?"

There was a first-class barrier around the arena in order to keep magic that was cast inside the magic practice field from affecting the outside. Natsume couldn't establish a link with magic even if she tried to trace Harutora's aura. She couldn't help but be stunned.

The Mystical Investigator laughed coldly.

"Do you feel very sad that your fancied shikigami will die? But, you don't need to be upset, as I will take the burden of being your next shikigami - your retainer to

guide and protect you. I am the one fit for the awakened King. I am the new Hishamaru!"

The Mystical Investigator spoke nonsense wildly and arrogantly, and Natsume didn't pay them any heed, her mind occupied with thoughts of Harutora.

She remembered that she had fought with Harutora during the noon break. She didn't believe that Harutora would die like that, but Harutora was helpless facing the kodoku unleashed by a specialist Mystical Investigator.

A dark despair shrouded Natsume and her wide eyes could only see darkness.

"Is this real....."

A quiet voice slowly dripped like blood from Natsume's lips.

But... "......What's going on?" The Mystical Investigator suddenly raised his head, moving his gaze above and away from Natsume's body.

A clump of fog entered through the entrance to the spectator seats.

A clump of slowly moving, pulsating, living fog.

It was a kodoku. The Kodoku rushed straight towards the arena from above the spectator seats and was blocked off by the invisible barrier's wall. Even though it was blocked, the kodoku still continued to charge forward, trying to force itself through. Moreover, the Mystical Investigator standing in the center of the arena gave off an intense anger and hatred.

"How is this possible! The kodoku I released was somehow returned?"

He shouted with a dumbfounded look. At a loss, Natsume looked up towards the spectator seats with her tearful face.

Not long after--

A definitely unmistakable voice passed through the barrier from the other side of the entrance that the kodoku had rushed in from, reaching Natsume's ears.

"--Natsume! You're alright!"

Natsume breathed deeply.

Part 3

"Harutora!"

Upon hearing that cry, Harutora quickly rushed into the spectator seats of the magic practice field with all his power.

This was the first time he had looked from the spectator seats at the magic practice field where the shikigami battle had been held yesterday, and at the time he hadn't noticed how vast this arena really was due to the tense situation.

The spectator seats were devoid of people, and there were only two figures inside the light-illuminated arena. There was that suit-wearing man in the center of the area , his head turned to look at Harutora - the Mystical Investigator. The other person who was tied and bound while lying at his feet was the uniform-wearing Natsume .

"Natsume!"

He couldn't see Natsume clearly because of the distance between them, but the voice that had called out to him didn't sound like she had been hurt. Harutora had made it in time, Natsume was safe.

The kodoku continuously rushed from the front row of the spectator seats towards the two people in the center of the arena before it. Harutora rushed down the descending spectator seats, stopping in front of the squirming kodoku.

First Kon, then Touji and Tenma, and finally Kyouko bringing Hakuou and Kokfuu appeared in the spectator seats in succession after Harutora. "D, Did we make it?" Tenma asked. After Touji quickly inspected the condition of the area, he briefly nodded his head to respond.

Then, he turned to Kyouko who followed behind him, saying with a smile:

".....It seems like it went pretty successfully."

Kyouko was short of breath, maybe because she been affected by continuously using magic, but she still desperately regulated her breathing, nodding her head at Touji.

Touji's proposed battle plan in the classroom had been a 'counter-curse'.

A counter-curse, namely eliminating the magic cast by the other party, returned the magic to the practitioner. Curses originally referred to turning the spiritual power of negative emotions like anger or hatred into the power required for magic, and because of this, eliminating the control imposed over the magical power could liberate the magical power and turn the attack towards the practitioner who had used it. This counter-curse was the most effective magic against the kodoku, which used resentment as magical power.

But, this was a kodoku cast by a Mystical Investigator - a specialist in casting magic on humans - and it wasn't simple to destroy its firm control, especially since this was Kyouko's first time trying to cast a counter-curse.

"Luckily, Touji-kun started the sprinkler system and weakened the kodoku's power, or else we couldn't have succeeded no matter how powerful Kurahashi-san was."

Tenma, who had successfully cracked the classroom's barrier, spoke excitedly. In order to lessen Kyouko's burden, Harutora, Kon, Touji, and Tenma had fought

with their full strength. It would have been hard to escape the crisis without the hard work of any one of them.

"......So with this, it's obvious who the culprit is, but it's truly unexpected."

Kyouko spoke with disdain, gazing at the arena from the spectator seats and staring at the Mystical Investigator who looked back at them.

The out-of-control fog was obviously trying to attack the Mystical Investigator in the arena, proving that the practitioner who had used the kodoku was none other than him. This was the clearest evidence.

They had wondered when someone had set a barrier in the classroom. Since the Mystical Investigator had carried out investigations of Natsume's surroundings, there had been numerous opportunities for him to set down magic beforehand. The kodoku was the same. Since it had been magic used inside the academy building, the barrier sealing off the building naturally wouldn't respond. Moreover, as long as he stayed inside the magic practice field's arena, he wouldn't have to worry about magical espionage for even a moment. What

seemed like an unplanned attack had actually been deliberate and profound.

On the other hand, the Mystical Investigator's body shook from anger and mortification as he stood in the arena, raising his head to look at the kodoku he had released along with the academy students who had done away with the kodoku.

But, he suppressed his roused emotions again, a cold smile appearing on his face, and spat.

"......Well, if it isn't the Kurahashi family tomboy who's usually quarreling bitterly with the king..... Truly a miscalculation."

He took out a bloodstained charm from the pocket of his suit, deliberately raising it high in front of them and slowly tearing it in two. With that tear, the fog stuck to the barrier thrashed painfully, splitting left and right and dissipating into mist. He had long since prepared countermeasures to guard against a counter-curse situation.

Harutora broke into a run again upon seeing that action, sprinting towards the arena.

"So you were the culprit! You haven't done anything to Natsume, have you!?"

The Mystical Investigator snorted and replied to Harutora's angry roar.

"......I just made him listen to some of my words here. How could I hurt him, especially since I have no intention of harming Natsume-kun. Isn't that natural? Even if he's immature, he's still the king."

The Mystical Investigator replied with a smile.

His narrowed eyes were dark, and it could be seen that this unexpected development annoyed him. But he even showed self-control in his expression, and his tone regained its calm, his lips always presenting a mocking smile.

Kyouko blew a raspberry at him fiercely.

"Before we came here, we used a simple shikigami to inform the teachers, and they will hurry here very quickly after they learn what's happened. You have nowhere to run, especially since this is inside the Onmyou Academy."

"R, Right! Y, You should surrender peacefully and release Natsume-kun!"

Tenma continued Kyouko's cold words, also raising his voice to clamor at the Mystical Investigator. Touji was silent, showing a look as sharp as a knife's edge as he watched the Mystical Investigator's reaction.

"Okay, I'll let him go. It's my loss this time, I'll leave this place quickly."

The Mystical Investigator shrugged his shoulders readily. "Huh?" Tenma exclaimed in surprise, and Kyouko was also stunned.

"My goal this time was just to let Natsume-san know about my existence, and though I hoped that he would understand more of the truth..... I'll leave it to be said ' next time'."

He spoke leisurely. Harutora heard it and couldn't help but growl with gritted teeth: "You bastard....."

Just then--

"Do you understand the consequences of this?" Natsume, who was lying on the ground, spoke.

The Mystical Investigator turned around towards her with a 'nn?'.

".....Not only will you be unable to return to the Onmyou Agency, you'll even be hunted down instead. Do you truly think you can escape from the Onmyou Agency's pursuit?"

"Oh my, did you forget what I said just now? That there are still many of my comrades in the Onmyou Agency?"

The Mystical Investigator replied, showing an insidious smile. Natsume was momentarily speechless.

"Indeed, I won't be able to continue moving in the spotlight with this, but it's not important. I'll hide in the background and wait for the day of your true awakening to come. There are many who look forward to the North Star King descending upon this world again, definitely far more than you imagine."

Then, the Mystical Investigator respectfully opened his arms and pressed his hand to his chest, bowing deeply.

"I shall take my leave. I look forward to meeting you again soon....."

After saying this dramatically, he turned around without waiting for a reply, sticking both hands in his pants pockets and slowly striding away. Needless to say, he didn't even glance at the students in the spectator seats.

But-- "Hold on, man." Harutora called out to the Mystical Investigator with one leg on the railing separating the spectator seats and the arena. The Mystical Investigator momentarily stopped walking towards the arena exit upon hearing this.

"Do you think you can escape? Do you think we'll let you go?"

He was obviously deliberately provoking him.

Natsume, Kyouko, and the others' eyes widened. The stopped Mystical Investigator leisurely raised his head, replying to Harutora with a callous voice.

"Oh? 'Let me go'? I don't think I have any need to ask you to 'let me go', hmm? Could it be that eliminating that little kodoku gave you some misunderstanding?"

The Mystical Investigator calmly turned around to face Harutora, scornfully staring back at Harutora's sharp gaze.

He spread his arms wide.

"Come if you want, since you won't let me escape, why don't you come forth! I'll let you witness what the power of a true Onmyouji actually is!"

"....."

Harutora wordlessly raised his shakujou, and Kon's killing intent simmered by the side as she prepared for battle.

"D, Don't do it, Harutora-kun!"

Tenma hurriedly spoke to stop him from behind.

Kyouko also grimaced regretfully, but had to plead Harutora to stop.

"Quick, stop. The enemy is a specialized Onmyouji, however crazy he is. I'm already almost at my limit too, so it might be very hard to block the next attack."

The curbing voices of his classmates sounded from behind him, but Harutora still stared viciously at the Mystical Investigator.

"......The teachers should have noticed the disturbance, and if things go smoothly, maybe they will be able to subdue him before he leaves the academy. If you act rashly right now, Natsume will be in danger." Touji who had always been maintaining his silence finally opened his mouth.

"Tch.....!"

Touji spoke correctly, the Mystical Investigator indeed planned on releasing Natsume. If something happened right now, it could lead to him taking Natsume as a hostage, and the situation was bound to become even more dangerous.

Harutora gritted his teeth, loosening his arms that tightly gripped the shakujou. The Mystical Investigator didn't pass up that good opportunity to mock Harutora either. "Alright, then, I take my leave."

After he leisurely dropped those words, he walked towards the exit again. Harutora and the others could only silently watch his back depart.

Just as Harutora and the others were watching him leave--

"......You said you were my Hishamaru." The bound Natsume tossed her head, shouting loudly. Harutora and the others shook in fright, and the Mystical Investigator also turned around in surprise.

But, the surrounding reactions didn't arouse Natsume's notice. She insisted out loud as she lay weakly on the floor:

"I don't care what kind of nonsense you and your comrades love to believe or what you think, since it's all just wishful thinking. If I had a Hishamaru by my side, that person would be Harutora, because Harutora is my only shikigami in the real world."

If the principal or Ohtomo were here, they definitely would have clapped their hands and cheered.

It was wonderful and easy to understand, simply the best demonstration of second-class magic.

Actually, the effects were quite surprising.

"My King! That is truly saddening."

"This is simply disappointing!"

The Mystical Investigator ripped apart his feigned mask of calmness, angrily scolding Natsume. The moment that this young man broke free of his shackles of keeping a calm mind had finally come.

Moreover--

"Even if you're immature, you shouldn't have been led astray by this brat!"

"No matter how ignorant you are, the king shouldn't say such crazy words to those who will eventually become your aides! Be careful with your language!"

The Mystical Investigator's way of speaking changed, and other than the original voice, a deep voice with a completely different tone also chimed in. The two indeed both came from his mouth, but it was as if he had two personalities, with both saying different things.

His eyes were bloodshot. Saliva overflowed from his mouth. His agitated face was dyed with a dark red. He roared angrily at Natsume, but his eyes were dull, not looking at Natsume at all.

Harutora and the others gaped, and Natsume also couldn't conceal her surprise at the reaction she had caused which surpassed her expectations.

"This is bad." Touji 'tch'ed, but he could do nothing about the situation before him.

The Mystical Investigator leaned his entire body backwards.

"It can't be helped, since things have come to this--"

"--I'll let you brats witness the proof that we are suited to become confidants of the North Star King!"

Immediately after, aura coalesced into a giant eddy behind the Mystical Investigator's back.

The aura inside the arena was always kept in a steady state in order to raise the stability of magic. Because of this, the sudden spike in magical power made the originally calm aura writhe intensely like a stormy sea.

A titanic shikigami appeared behind the back of the Mystical Investigator who was looking at the sky and laughing madly.

"That's an..... Oni[16]?"

Harutora exclaimed in surprise and Kon gaped. Natsume, Touji, Kyouko, and Tenma all stared breathlessly.

The shikigami that appeared before them was an exemplification of an oni.

The shikigami was three times taller than the Mystical Investigator who stood in front of it. Two sharp, curved horns grew out of a mane of tough fur, pointing into the sky. Its upper body was naked, and its lower body was

encircled by shabby leather trousers. Its rope-like muscles bulged from underneath its dark, exposed skin as if it were raising a big snake inside its body.

That appearance was completely identical to the oni spoken of in ancient legends. Upon seeing that mighty appearance, the body had already felt its oppressive, confrontational feeling like a giant beast's long before the mind had reacted, the pressure that a ferocious and cunning unknown creature gave off.

This oni had two notable features.

One was the bronze mask covering its face.

The other was--

"One arm? A one-armed oni..... Impossible! No way!?"

Kyouko shrieked in shock. The oni was missing the lower half of its left arm like it had been cut off. Kyouko, Natsume, and Tenma were all extremely familiar with which famous practitioner had used a one-armed oni.

The Mystical Investigator showed an overjoyed look upon hearing Kyouko's scream.

"King! My great king! Could you have already forgotten the name you bestowed?"

"The King of the North Star, Tsuchimikado Yakou, was served by two retainers--"

The Mystical Investigator declared loudly.

"I am Hishamaru!"

"And I am - Kakugyouki."

Chapter 5 - One-Armed Oni

Part 1

...Yakou's shikigami.....!?

Kakugyouki, the Mystical Investigator had said, naming himself Hishamaru. Harutora had impressions of those two names, and he remembered that they had indeed been two especially famous ones among Yakou's shikigami, but why would Yakou's shikigami be here? His mind was befuddled and his gaze stared intently at the oni before him, unable to move.

"R, Really? Is that the real Kakugyouki? No way!?"

"Shut up, Tenma, how would I know whether it's real or not!"

Kyouko reprimanded Tenma who had sunk into a panic by the side, but her internal shock was clearly audible from her angry voice. She only reprimanded others to force herself to stay stable.

Touji's gaze was solemn, and he asked of Natsume who was lying in the arena: "Natsume! Can you tell?"

But Natsume, who was collapsed on the ground and had a close look at the strange figure, couldn't reply to Touji's question for some time. Her mind was close to paralyzed, and all she could see by looking up from her position was Kakugyouki's overwhelming, gigantic bulk.

She squeezed out the words "I don't know.....", her gaze still lingering on the oni before her.

"I don't know, Kakugyouki is a servant shikigami, which is a materialized spirit! Moreover, it was an ancient 'demon' that lived for several centuries - rumored to be a true oni. Going by those sayings, its exterior could have changed significantly..... E, Except for the spiritual characteristic of its single arm....."

The Mystical Investigator couldn't help but snicker upon hearing Natsume's explanation. Natsume could ' see' the link of spiritual power between the Mystical Investigator and the oni, and this oni - Kakugyouki - was surely his shikigami that he used.

"I materialized, yet you show no signs of awakening..... ."

"How troublesome, Natsume-kun. It seems like this will take some time."

The Mystical Investigator let out two kinds of voices one after another with an entranced look, two obviously different voices.

"What's going on? The whereabouts of Hishamaru and Kakugyouki were lost after Yakou died, and they're still unknown even today! What are you playing at?"

"I do not intend to answer the question you ask, my King."

"It's alright, Kakugyouki - the situation is very simple, Natsume-kun. As Yakou has reincarnated into your body , I am Hishamaru's reincarnation, and that is why Kakugyouki is beside me. We have always been gathering comrades, waiting for our master to awaken."

The Mystical Investigator was in a trance, speaking for both Kakugyouki - the oni before them - and the reincarnated Hishamaru - himself - at the same time. Natsume unconsciously stared dumbfounded.

"......This, how can such a stupid thing....."

"That won't do, King. Reality is laid out before you, it is undeniable."

"Hishamaru, enough talking, let's get that brat first."

A sadistic smile floated onto the Mystical Investigator's mouth, like a cat torturing mice.

At the same time Kakugyouki took action.

Its target was - Harutora.

--What?

Kakugyouki's body was gigantic, and it was hard to imagine that its movements were quite swift. Its fist closed the distance in moments, swinging towards the spectator seats - right underneath the railing Harutora stood on.

The patterns on the wall flashed intensely, and the originally colorless and transparent barrier flared in countless sparks, the air shaking violently. The National First-Class barrier's shape distorted, creaking.

Even so, the magic practice field barrier that was the pride of the Onmyou Academy did not break, but it was unable to block the intense physical shock. Harutora who stood above it lost his footing due to the shaking magic practice field and tumbled down.

"Ah!?"

Harutora fell into the arena from the railing. The arena was specially set to not react towards humans out of safety considerations.

"Harutora!"

Natsume shrieked in surprise as she saw Harutora fall, and Kyouko and Tenma also screamed out. Touji cursed, quickly running towards the front of the spectator seats.

"H-H-H, Harutora-sama!"

Kon hurriedly chased after Harutora in fright and slammed into the barrier as a result. Touji who was rushing forward grabbed Kon by her tail, roaring: "Go around from the back entrance!" and then threw her out.

Kon frantically took advantage of that time to leave the spectator seats, and seeing this, Kyouko also had Hakuou and Kokfuu quickly leave and chase after Kon.

The shikigami could still be controlled from outside the arena barrier after they entered the area. She hadn't

actually considered what actions the shikigami and Kon could take after they entered the arena, since even now her mind was still blank.

Tenma ran to the front of the spectator seats along with Touji.

Kyouko also hurried after them.

"Hey, are you alright!?"

"Harutora-kun!"

Harutora heard the voices calling out to him from above. He endured the pain from the fall, standing up in the arena.

He was right by Kakugyouki's feet.

"...!"

Kakugyouki kicked out with its right leg, sweeping towards Harutora and leaving him with nowhere to hide. He hastily dodged and blocked with the shakujou, but it wasn't certain whether that move would actually be effective. Before he noticed, he was flying backwards in midair like he had been hit by a car.

"Harutora!"

Natsume screamed again. Immediately after, his body tumbled to the ground, doing several somersaults like he was rolling down a hill, then finally collapsed on the ground.

His entire body was paralyzed, and a burning shock lingered in the areas where he had been hit. The paralysis rapidly became intense pain coursing through Harutora's body like electricity.

A light moan trickled from Harutora's mouth.

...No, No good! Right now isn't the time to moan in agony!

He supported himself with the shakujou, standing up.

He first checked his own position, surprised that the kick just now had sent him through the entire arena. Only now did Kakugyouki move back the right leg it had kicked with.

He stood up before the enemy could follow up with a decisive blow - No, the other side hadn't actually pursued.

"Ugh....."

He stood up shakily, a shrill sound ringing deeply in his ears. Touji and the other three were shouting from the spectator seats, and Natsume was also voicing something at him, but he didn't know what they were saying. His entire body was hot, his heart feeling like it had inflated twice as large, beating intensely in bursts.

".....It's really not a fake, huh....."

His ears caught his own murmuring to himself, and only then did he confirm that his eardrums hadn't been damaged. He tried moving his body, ignoring the pain coming from every part of it. It was fortunate that his bones weren't broken, truly a fortune among misfortune.

But--

"What's wrong? Try to resist!"

"Haha, Kakugyouki, don't be inconsiderate."

At the same time as the Mystical Investigator teased, Kakugyouki jumped up. Its over five-meter tall body almost hit the arena's ceiling, and that shocking scene made Harutora unable to help but stare dumbstruck - just then, his vision suddenly went dark.

A shadow covered him.

"--Damn!"

Harutora sprinted with all his might, diving to the side . Kakugyouki immediately dropped next to him as he fled. The floor shook from the force of the impact, and Harutora staggered. Kakugyouki kicked out again.

The surrounding air made a low noise, and Harutora swung the shakujou in his hands almost by reflex.

The impact of the kick sent Harutora flying, but this time he didn't show any openings in his stance. He hurriedly regained his balance as he flew backwards, letting his feet touch ground. Though he had slid several meters backwards, his feet were still steady in the end and he hadn't collapsed to the ground.

...Right! This shakujou...

The shakujou had blocked Kakugyouki's kick.

The blow just now hadn't caused any damage because he had swung the shakujou defensively. Of course, this small rod couldn't block the giant's attack from a physical standpoint, but the instant the shakujou had encountered Kakugyouki's kick, he had sensed the shakujou itself reflecting the impact back. Magic had been cast on this shakujou.

...Way to go, Ohtomo-sensei! I see you differently now!

Unfortunately, he couldn't relax. Kakugyouki didn't give Harutora breathing room this time, kicking again and quickly following up. Harutora desperately dodged left and right.

It was like he were standing in the center of a high-speed interstate highway, as every one of Kakugyouki's kicks made the air swirl and almost drew his entire body in. He dodged the attacks at a nimble pace, suddenly standing and diving, managing to avoid Kakugyouki's attacks using the shakujou as a shield.

"Hm."

"Oh my, not bad. That toy in your hands seems pretty interesting."

The Mystical Investigator laughed. Shut up and go die, bastard! Harutora roared angrily in his heart, but he didn't have the energy to raise his voice. The shakujou was still holding up, but the hands he grasped the shakujou with had long since neared their limits and begun to go numb.

Just then.

"Stop!"

Natsume yelled, and Kakugyouki simultaneously stopped moving.

"Please, don't keep fighting.....!"

She lowered her head from where she lay on the ground, her voice bitter. Harutora wanted to call out to Natsume, but his breathing stopped him from doing this. He was using all of his strength to breathe, and he couldn't even let out his voice.

The Mystical Investigator hmphed.

"Oh, King....."

"...It seems like you are finally willing to cooperate. I shall comply with this order, my King."

Kakugyouki slowly relaxed its stance upon hearing this, moving back from Harutora. Harutora gritted his teeth and endured, inadvertently sitting down on the ground. His strength had rapidly been depleted in the tempest of violent attacks.

"Do you understand now?"

"You must accept your fate, and us as well, of course. We have always been waiting, and we will continue to serve you in the future. Are you willing to recognize us?"

The Mystical Investigator asked, his tone quite arrogant. Natsume lowered her head, silently listening to what he said.

Her flowing black hair covered her face, hiding her expression, and the white cheeks exposed underneath slowly moved.

Harutora took a deep breath--

"Hold on, Natsume."

Hearing this, Natsume turned around.

Her teary black eyes gazed at Harutora from between the gaps in her drooping bangs. Harutora showed a courageous smile before his childhood friend's eyes.

He desperately regulated his breathing, forcing saliva down his dry throat.

He pushed the trivialities like pain and fatigue to the back of his mind, standing proudly, and set the shakujou against the ground, making a metallic sound.

"You don't need to pay attention to the words this lunatic says, and you don't need to rely on your past life's subjects for help either. Aren't your companions all here right now?"

"......Harutora....."

Natsume forgot the surrounding situation momentarily, her eyes gazing straight at Harutora. Harutora returned her gaze, breathing rapidly.

"I'm sorry for the words I said to you at noon. I'm tactless, but I don't think that I said anything wrong. You indeed need courage, even more courage that I talked about during the day. So..." Harutora spoke forcefully. He was clearly forcing himself - this claim was clearly painful and difficult, but he still spoke straight from the shoulder.

"So, don't be affected by those silly rumors about the past, don't try to shoulder everything by yourself, and don't pretend. Even if there are people scared of you and people who are troubled by you, there are definitely people who are willing to lend you a helping hand. So, don't be scared of getting along with others. Be brave and rely on us."

"....."

Natsume's eyes widened as she stared firmly at Harutora. She had heard it. He truly felt that way. Strength inexplicably filled forth, his body's pain lessened, and his depleted strength swelled again.

Master and shikigami.

The powers of the two people interacted through the bond between them, strengthening each other.

But--

"Idiotic!"

"Truthfully."

The Mystical Investigator reviled, his voice and tone clearly showing his incomprehension.

"You're confusing the King, you brat! As expected, I can't leave you alone!"

"Exactly, Hishamaru, let us put that brat in order as quickly as possible.[17]"

Kakugyouki who had backed off once again strode towards Harutora. Harutora raised the shakujou, engaging the giant's arena-shaking attack head-on.

Be brave and rely on your companions' help.

Those words were not only for Natsume, as they were just as suitable for his immature self. At the same time as

Harutora engaged Kakugyouki, he spotted their figures quietly approaching out of the corner of his eye.

"Do it, I'm counting on you guys!"

Harutora shouted, and Hakuou and Kokfuu, who had circled around to the arena's blind spot, quickly attacked Kakugyouki.

The katana and spear cleaved Kakugyouki's legs. The giant made a wordless howl, its movements becoming chaotic, and Harutora rushed forward all at once, swinging the shakujou to attack.

"Take this!"

The small rings on the front end rattled, making noise. The rings formed blades using aura, like circular guillotines in midair.

He swung the shakujou, hitting Kakugyouki's right arm that it was trying to support itself with. The dark-colored skin tore, leading to an intense 'lag' reaction .

"H, Harutora."

"Don't worry, Natsume! This thing is minor compared to that spider!"

He shouted out, half from his heartfelt belief and half to force himself.

This oni was indeed a frightful shikigami. In Harutora's view, both the Tsuchigumo from back then and the Kakugyouki before him were monsters surpassing his imagination.

But, both Tsuchigumo and Kakugyouki were shikigami in the end. No matter how powerful a shikigami was, finding out the strength of the controller meant there was a chance of victory. He couldn't sense any of the terrifying feeling that Dairenji Suzuka had carried back then from the Mystical Investigator before him.

Harutora swung the shakujou again, taking advantage of the moments that Kakugyouki had stopped moving due to 'lag'.

He circled to the side, slashing at Kakugyouki's stomach. Every time he attacked, he could feel the shakujou quietly absorbing aura and returning a more violent aftershock to his arms.

...So it's like this, no wonder this shakujou is this easy to use.....!

When he had fought with the Armored Juggernaut, Natsume had given him a 'Protection Sword', and the sensations of the two were similar. The magic cast on Ohtomo's shakujou might be the same kind of magic that was on the Protection Sword.

"W, What's wrong, to think you're this shameful! Use your full strength, Kakugyouki!"

The Mystical Investigator roared with a hoarse voice. The one-armed shikigami followed its master's orders, turning around with no regard to the injuries on its body.

Kakugyouki readily turned its back to the two Yaksha behind it, kicking out with its scarred feet. Harutora jumped backwards, avoiding the attack. Hakuou and Kokfuu slashed with their blades again, and Kakugyouki , whose back was cut, tumbled to the ground and collapsed.

A good opportunity.

The moment Harutora thought this, the fallen Kakugyouki unexpectedly swung its right arm, not planning on guarding its own body.

The rough arm that was several times larger than Harutora's body swept across the ground. Harutora immediately raised the shakujou to block, but couldn't block the impact, crashing violently into the wall surrounding the arena.

Though the shakujou had absorbed a good part of the shikigami Kakugyouki's attack power, just the physical impact of crashing into the wall made Harutora gasp for breath. An intense pain wracked his whole body, his vision was tinted red, and his lungs stopped breathing. It was a fortune among misfortunes that he didn't collapse, and he slid down the wall, propping himself to his knees with the shakujou.

The strike just now had been quite strong, and he couldn't even move a finger with the painful impact that had just wracked his body.

Kakugyouki raised the right arm it had struck Harutora with from where it was collapsed on the ground. Hakuou and Kokfuu hurriedly slashed their

blades to help, but Kakugyouki didn't concern itself with them at all. The face hidden underneath the mask obeyed its master's orders, and only Harutora was in its eyes.

...Damn!

The attack came from above, and he couldn't escape this blow, nor did he have the energy to dodge.

But, just as his face paled from fright, a small figure flitted across in front of Kakugyouki.

It was Kon.

A burst of pale blue flame.

Kon's foxfire blocked the mask, doing almost no damage, but enough to distract Kakugyouki's focus, achieving a disturbance effect.

Kon who had released the foxfire swiftly rushed towards Harutora, grabbing him and rolling to the side - Kakugyouki's fist immediately followed, smashing into the position where Harutora had just been kneeling.

Harutora clenched his jaw as the tempestuous impact assaulted him. He stood up, leaning on the wall behind

him, putting force into his legs to stay stable on the ground.

"Hah!"

The shakujou forcefully pierced into the mask of Kakugyouki who laid nearby.

He mustered his entire body's spiritual power, using all of his strength.

Harutora's full-power strike smashed the mask on Kakugyouki.

In that moment.

Kakugyouki howled madly.

A close to human face showed from underneath Kakugyouki's mask.

But, that face seemed abnormally ugly, lacking a feeling of reality, like a doll whose face had been carelessly added on, completely unlike a creature.

The grieving face that was revealed roared with all its might.

This was the first time Kakugyouki had let out its voice, and dejection, anger, and panic filled its voice.

"This is....."

Harutora had pierced the mask in a strike, carving a hole in the oni's forehead. Blood seeped out of the wound, and Kakugyouki angrily leaned upwards, bellowing towards the ceiling. The bellows were like a baby's cries - single-minded, full-power, and extremely grieving howls.

Just then.

"Harutora-sama!"

Kon reached out her hands, grabbing Harutora and fleeing from Kakugyouki with all her might as she almost carried him. Kakugyouki didn't pursue, but instead stomped on the ground with all of its might, flipping backwards in midair.

It kicked towards the ceiling and was repulsed by the barrier, causing the arena to shake for a while as it deftly turned in midair like a cat while falling. It beat the walls, smashed the ground with its forehead, and thrashed its right arm and legs, completely out of control. Hakuou

and Kokfuu hastily pulled away from Kakugyouki, almost caught up in its frenzy.

"W, What's going on! Why did that thing go crazy!"

Harutora shouted in surprise, but the desperately fleeing Kon didn't have the energy to reply.

"Y, You idiot!"

The Mystical Investigator screamed, his look no longer leisurely. Even his insane demeanor had disappeared without a trace.

"Th, That mask was Kakugyouki's seal! With this, I can't even control Kakugyouki! He won't stop raging until he destroys everything around him!"

The low voice that he had called Kakugyouki was no longer audible in his tone, only leaving his own voice filled with terror and despair, which had more authenticity than anything else he had said.

"What did you say!" Harutora looked at Kakugyouki from Kon's arms. Kakugyouki hadn't singled out anyone

- not even himself - and just destroyed wantonly while roaring, its movements even more violent and reckless than when it had been covered by a mask.

They were helpless - perhaps it should be said that they could do nothing at all, as even approaching it would be difficult.

"Damn, damn, you damn brat! Look at what you've done!"

The Mystical Investigator gritted his teeth, cursing continuously. However, his face was pale, and things were obviously already irreversible.

The moment Kakugyouki's fist fell near him - "Eek!" The shock made the Mystical Investigator's body tremble , and he retreated while stumbling, and then fled towards the exit without heeding anything.

"Bastard--!"

Harutora twisted his body in Kon's arms, brushing off the shikigami who tried to stop him and tumbling to the ground in midair.

But he couldn't catch up. The Mystical Investigator was on the other side of the arena, and the raging Kakugyouki blocked the space between them. The Mystical Investigator had stood around the exit since he had started to control Kakugyouki, ensuring an escape route. He could only stand by anxiously and watch the suit-wearing figure leave through the exit.

Just then--

"Harutora-kun!"

"Tenma?"

"You hurry up and escape too! That shikigami has already lost control, so take advantage of it and escape while you can!"

Kakugyouki's current actions could be described as aimless, and it just unscrupulously destroyed everything in its surroundings, seeming truly arbitrary.

"But can we just let that thing mess up the arena?"

"It can't destroy the barrier here, so it can't leave the arena! As long as we close it inside, we don't have to worry about dealing with it!"

Harutora raised his head to shout at the spectator sears , and Kyouko shouted back a reply from next to Tenma. Her shikigami had already begun to leave the battle site.

"Harutora-sama, please go!"

From the situation before him, Harutora wouldn't be able to stop the raging Kakugyouki even if he stayed inside the arena. Even Kon who descended next to Harutora also urged her master.

But--

"Harutora!"

A shout as loud as gunfire came from Touji, and that shout wasn't to urge Harutora to escape quickly.

In truth, it was just the opposite. That voice was to encourage Harutora and give him a push from behind. When he understood Touji's meaning, electricity momentarily coursed through Harutora's body.

...Natsume!

After the Mystical Investigator escaped a step ahead, only Natsume was left in the area. She laid on the ground , her hands and feet bound, desperately crawling on the ground and trying to take refuge by hiding near the wall.

Kakugyouki was roaring behind her, and Harutora had already spread his legs and bolted before he had time to think.

He immersed himself in sprinting.

Kakugyouki thrashed indiscriminately, destroying the floor and smashing the walls with enough momentum to make the air seethe. With such a destructive rage, Harutora didn't even have the time to shout at Natsume, just rushing straight for her. He even flung the shakujou in his hands to the side, sprinting with all his might towards Natsume.

Kakugyouki leaped out in front of him, a thunderous roar coming from its mouth.

The angry roar burst out, the impact slamming into Harutora. Harutora's hair stood on end, the skin all over

his body feeling numb as if he had been electrified, but he didn't stop his feet, reaching out his right hand instead and searching for the box of charms on his waist.

His finger flicked open the buckle on the box's lid - simultaneously drawing out a charm.

"Order!"

It could almost be described as Harutora's only good skill - rapidly throwing charms. Kyouko and Tenma couldn't help but gasp in the spectator seats as they looked at his fluid and unhesitant charm-throwing movement. He threw a protective charm that glowed in the air, forming a magical barrier and blocking Kakugyouki's movement.

But this only lasted a short few seconds.

When Harutora was about to circle around Kakugyouki's body, Kakugyouki's right arm forcefully swung in a punch that almost crushed the ground, destroying the protective charm's barrier and leaving a five-fingered mark on the ground. Then, it approached Harutora.

In that moment--

Kon cut through the air like an arrow, the tip of her wakizashi stabbing into the oni's left eye. Kakugyouki reflexively swung its right arm, passing over Harutora's head.

Kakugyouki bellowed angrily again.

Kon spun in midair, rapidly leaving Kakugyouki's side . Harutora took advantage of that opportunity to rush towards Natsume.

"Natsume!"

Harutora knelt by Natsume's side, picking her up directly with no time to release the rope that bound her hands and feet.

The crisis hadn't been dealt with. He hurriedly rushed towards the exit, but Kakugyouki blocked his path again. Kakugyouki, who should have fallen into a frenzy, ' identified' Harutora and roared, showing its fangs towards him.

...Damn, I can't escape!?

Harutora held Natsume in his arms, frozen in place.

The shakujou had been flung into the center of the arena, and even if he held the shakujou in his hands right now, he couldn't protect Natsume while blocking attacks. Kon hastily flew in front of Harutora to protect her master and to confront Kakugyouki, but her figure was

far too small compared with the giant that was approaching before him.

He could only use that moment to break through and pass under Kakugyouki's legs while carrying Natsume.

Just as Harutora had resolved himself - Natsume spoke from Harutora's arms:

"There's no need."

The uniform on her body was messy and her black hair was tangled due to her crawling on the ground just now, a strong and surprising contrast with her porcelain-like beautiful appearance.

Two eyes contained a strong light beneath her black hair, like faintly flickering stars in the night sky.

Natsume stared at Kakugyouki.

"Harutora-kun, tear off the four charms stuck on my body."

Harutora immediately did as she ordered without saying a word.

Kakugyouki progressively approached, a burning breath emanating from its giant mouth.

However, Harutora didn't move at all, as Natsume in his arms absolved him of all his fear.

Natsume calmly and forcefully called out a summons in her shikigami's arms.

She summoned a different shikigami.

"I command you by the name of Tsuchimikado Natsume. Emerge, Hokuto. I order you to attack--"

In the next second, a golden light burst forth above Harutora and Natsume's heads.

The light shot out, gradually extending upwards, and the lengthening gigantic body swayed as if breaking the chains that bound it.

A blinding golden band of light soared leisurely into the air.

A dragon.

The Tsuchimikado guardian beast that had been inherited by the Tsuchimikado family's heir Natsume - the servant shikigami, Hokuto.

Kyouko and Tenma who were watching the battle with bated breath from the spectator seats gaped, and Touji's mouth thinned, his wide eyes gazing at the scene before him. Even Kon by Harutora's feet widened her eyes, her body trembling all over, exclaiming in surprise.

Hokuto didn't pay any heed to the surrounding awestruck gazes at all, comfortably stretching its body out in midair.

The dragon seemed to be enjoying its freedom, obviously carefree, and completely ignoring the breathless oni before it. To describe that appearance a bit favorably, it was laziness, and to describe it unfavorably, it was indolence. The quarrel underneath it was like a slight breeze, and it just roamed about the vast arena however it liked.

There were openings across the dragon's entire body, but the oni didn't swing its violent right arm. Moreover, it couldn't help but moan and step back as if it were simply scared.

It had only just emerged, yet the aura the dragon gave off had such an overwhelming sense of presence.

Harutora who had already experienced it couldn't help but look up in amazement, even feeling like once Hokuto appeared the originally threatening and mighty Kakugyouki had instantly become minuscule.

".....Hokuto!"

Natsume ordered again, and Hokuto could only twist its body in resignation--

It neatly took a battle stance in midair like a drawn bow.

A blazing flame kindled in its calm eyes, warning the enemy of the upcoming imminent disaster.

Kakugyouki's expression tightened.

In an instant, like the sword strike of a master - The golden scales on Hokuto's body shone, and its twisted body suddenly extended, rushing straight at Kakugyouki using the force of the rebound.

Like an avalanche pouring down a mountainside, Hokuto had already approached by the time Kakugyouki noticed.

Kakugyouki raised its right arm, trying to defend against Hokuto's attack. But before its hand had risen, the surging Hokuto's body twisted, turning back around.

The two of them overlapped for a moment.

The dragon's fangs had bitten apart the oni's neck.

Blood spewed out like a fountain, dissipating into mist before it dirtied the floor.

The oni's giant figure became blurry, oscillating and flickering intensely.

Kakugyouki vanished accordingly.

The aura forming the oni rapidly scattered.

".....Did we win?"

They had unexpectedly won so easily - just as Harutora thought this, his body's strength was exhausted all at once. He staggered and almost fell to the ground

while carrying Natsume, but fortunately Kon hastily came to support him.

".....Did we beat Kakugyouki?"

More accurately, it was Hokuto's doing, not theirs, but Natsume still replied: "Yes." She quietly nodded.

"H-H-Harutora-sama, this battle was splendid!"

"Ah, I didn't..... rather, I've been at my limit....."

Harutora's feet buckled again, and he sat down on the ground with Kon's help. After sitting down, he still didn't dare to believe that the battle had already ended.

But things had finally come to an end. The Mystical Investigator had escaped, and unfortunately Harutora couldn't even chase after him right now. There was no choice, he could only settle for the time being, and leave the rest to someone else - leave it to be dealt by someone who had enough strength to stand up.

Above Harutora and the others, Hokuto, who had gotten rid of the enemy, showed a triumphant appearance, wandering proudly through the air.

Touji jumped down into the arena from the spectator seats, and Tenma and Kyouko followed suit and jumped down after hesitating for a moment.

The three of them rushed towards Harutora and Natsume, and ignoring Touji for now, the other two were the same as Harutora and wore an expression of being unable to accept that the battle had already ended. However, upon seeing that Harutora and Natsume were safe and sound, the creases on their faces finally relaxed.

...We made it.

Harutora deeply appreciated that fact. Comfort and joy flooded forth, and there was no moment more beautiful than the present in the current Harutora's heart.

Just then, Natsume suddenly collapsed onto Harutora, lightly burying her small head in Harutora's chest.

Had she fainted? Harutora thought, unable to help panicking a bit.

But.

"Natsume? Are you alright?"

"......Yeah."

A weak voice from his chest replied to his call, none of the stern voice from when she had summoned Hokuto audible. Harutora wondered, and when he thought about seeing her face clearly, she turned her body again.

"N, Natsume?"

He called out anxiously.

"......I was very happy to see you save me, thank you....."

Natsume spoke hoarsely. After she said this, she buried her face in Harutora's chest again as if to escape. The soft sensation combined with her tender whisper pricked Harutora's heart.

His heartbeat accelerated intensely.

"Uh, okay."

He replied with a distressed tone that even he himself felt was comical. Kon by his side seemed inexplicably peeved, huffily glaring out of the corners of her eyes at Harutora and Natsume who was curled on his body.

"......As I thought, this..... is different." Just then, Touji's low murmur cut through the arena's silence.

Harutora and Natsume turned around, and Kyouko and Tenma stopped.

Touji stood in the place where Kakugyouki had disappeared, looking at the ground with a grave expression. Then, he knelt down.

"......I thought things were strange early on. That thing was very powerful..... But a true oni doesn't have only that much capacity."

Touji picked up a damaged, almost torn apart charm as he said this.

"......What, what does that mean?"

Harutora tilted his head because he failed to understand, but the expressions of the other three changed upon seeing the charm.

"A shikigami charm?"

"And it's also..... a new shikigami charm? What's more , this is just a charm sold in the market."

Natsume and Kyouko spoke in confusion.

"S, Slow down, how could this be a shikigami charm sold in the market? Kakugyouki isn't a manmade-type, he should be a servant-type, right?"

Tenma raised his doubts as well, and only then did Harutora finally notice what was wrong.

When servant-type shikigami took shape as spiritual beings, the most often encountered situation was with some object as a materialized core, like an excessively bloodstained sword, the vestments that an extraordinarily strong head monk wore, or sometimes even in the form of humans, with aura gathered from the surroundings producing a spiritual beings.

However, shikigami charms were charms used as shikigami vessels, a tool for using manmade shikigami.

Since it had a shikigami charm - and moreover a ' brand-new shikigami charm sold on the market' - as a vessel, that meant this oni - this shikigami that appeared in the form of an oni - was a manmade shikigami.

In other words...

".....That Kakugyouki was fake?"

Natsume murmured blankly.

None of them nodded assent, but none of them spoke up to disagree.

Then.....

Part 2

The man escaped out of the Onmyou Academy building's back door with a pale face. The old man overlooking that scene sighed lightly in disappointment.

The old man was sitting in the backseat of a limousine stopped by the road in the parking lot not far from the back door. He rolled down the car window, angrily staring at the back of the desperately escaping man.

"What a waste of my expectations."

His wrinkle-lined mouth let out an unexpectedly youthful voice.

"Or should I say those children performed better than expected..... But it's really an eyesore to see that dignified man fall so low."

The old man wore a pitch-black kimono, with blood-red sunglasses on his face. His head of thin white hair had been styled neatly and tidily.

The old man seemed like a senior, but more accurately he looked like a dead man who had long since been killed. Though he was wearing sunglasses, no expression appeared on the old man's face. He just spoke while indifferently moving his lips.

However, his tone was young and showed rich emotion, completely different from the corpse-like cold

exterior that he wore, like a young person with plentiful vigor had been put into the body of a dying old man.

The man who escaped from the academy building turned a corner into an alley, his figure vanishing.

Just then, a darkness suddenly fell over the back window.

It was as if the sun had hidden behind a dark cloud, but what blocked the sun wasn't a cloud.

"...Yo."

A gruff voice came from above the car window, and it was a man who blocked the sunlight. He leaned on the limousine, peering into the car through the window without warning.

It was a giant man, his body about two meters tall, with impressive muscles all over his body and his big frame complementing each other.

Underneath his short golden crown of hair was a small face contrasting with his body type, with deep features as if he had a southern European ancestry.

The man's eyebrows were beautiful, and his eyes were narrowed into slits. His nose was high and his lips were rich. The fitted striped suit moderately regulated the man's overly strong unruliness, giving off a shrewd impression instead. On the other hand, every portion of that giant body gave off the rough temperament of a carnivore, and he couldn't hide it even if he tried. But, every movement the man made was clearly mature, worldly, and elegant, forming a sort of charm like a perfume floating in his presence.

Even someone blind could see that he wasn't a normal person, and 'a mafia leader' would be an apt description of him. His age seemed older than thirty, but it didn't seem like he had reached forty.

The man put his sturdy arm on the roof of the limousine, speaking to the old man inside the car:

"Could you not use someone else's name however you want."

Those words sounded like a denouncement, but there was no anger in the tone. The old man also replied leisurely as if he were bantering: "You caught me." His face still had that corpse-like expression, and he didn't

speak with a guilty conscience at all, but was clearly elated as if they were having great fun.

"Are you actually very curious?"

"Not really."

"How cold, didn't sixty years pass in an instant?"

"They weren't even sixty short years, it's not a past to be nostalgic about."

The man spoke calmly, and the old man secretly laughed as he listened.

"Really? I accumulated quite some resentment over these sixty years. I can truly call those times nostalgic."

"Don't take it to heart that much."

"You say that, but I've always had this disposition."

"Really..... You should just stay behind the scenes. Whenever you come out, there's significantly more trouble."

The man spoke like he was annoyed, but he was actually just pretending, and wasn't concerned at all in his heart. In the end, he still didn't plan on butting in even if the troublesome situations increased.

The old man seemed to get angry at his unconcerned air, stubbornly asking:

"Are you truly not concerned at all?"

"I can't say I'm completely unconcerned, but I won't run out especially to confirm. My methods are different from Hishamaru's." The man spoke impatiently.

"Hmph, I see..... So, you still can't make contact with Hishamaru? That guy is pretty cold."

"That's none of your business."

The man replied coldly. The interaction between the two seemed cold, but their responses seemed like they were familiar with each other, making one suspect whether the two men had been acquainted for a long time. In truth, the dealings between the two of them had been going for an incredibly long time.

"Right, the ghostly presence from your body is a bit too strong. I warned you before, can't you hide yourself a bit more seriously?"

"Sorry, I never really cared about these things since a long time ago."

"You're already this old..... Ah, you see, you even made me get noticed, and it was even by that youngster! Really....."

The old man muttered in disgust. If his expression could change, his face would have definitely scrunched up right now.

The man leaned on the car and turned his sturdy neck.

".....That guy huh, he doesn't seem as bad as you say. Do you know each other?'

"We crossed before. That arrogant fellow gave up a leg to escape my grasp."

The old man cursed resentfully. The man smiled slightly, saying sincerely: "That guy has a promising future." Those words made the old man unhappy.

"In any case, the Onmyou Academy's principal is a brilliant diviner, and perhaps she's long since seen through your deceit."

"Scheming against each other is the most interesting area."

"That's really a bad interest."

The man took his arm off the car roof as he said this, his body leaving the car's backseat window.

"Anyway, I don't plan on chipping in about how bad your interests are, but don't use my name however you want for these silly games. I just came to warn you about that."

He turned his back to the limousine. The old man didn't urge him to stay, nor did he open his mouth to say goodbye.

Just as he was about to stride away, the man suddenly stopped.

".....Right, where exactly is that brat from?"

"Nn? Which brat?"

"The tiger.[18]"

"Ahh, he seems like a branch family child, his strength isn't bad. With this, the tiger and dragon are side by side, but the tiger is truly weak..... Do you have some interest in that person?"

The old man asked, not understanding. Someone keen might be able to notice that there was a serpentine curiosity hidden in the old man's voice.

".....No, it's nothing. Remember not to go overboard, Doman."

"Hey hey, didn't you just say you wouldn't chip in about other people's interests?"

The old man retorted like he was lecturing a child. The man smiled wryly, finally leaving the limousine.

He walked with his back facing the old man and the academy building.

".....You haven't changed at all, still so loyal."

No one other than he himself heard those murmured words.

The man slowly walked away.

His right hand was stuck in his pants pocket.

The left hand of his clothing flapped gently in the wind.

"Damn..... Damn..... Bastard....."

Tears were streaming down the Mystical Investigator's face as he fled, his shoulders heaving up and down with his breathing.

Things shouldn't have turned out like this, everything was horribly wrong. Why had he fallen into such a miserable fate? He couldn't understand.

"Why? I'm Hishamaru, I am Hishamaru, but Kakugyouki..... Ahh, damn, what should I do to become accountable to that great man[19]!"

His mind couldn't operate normally because of confusion and despair. For the time being, he could only return to his comrades' side and listen to that great man's instructions. That old man who had suddenly appeared before him one day, told him about his[20] past life, and allowed him to reunite with his past partner Kakugyouki . He deeply believed that great man definitely had a way to resolve the difficulties before him--

".....Though I've been gone for a while, the quality of Mystical Investigators has fallen quite a bit."

The Mystical Investigator screamed and stopped moving, not knowing where the voice had come from.

He didn't see anyone whether he looked forward or backward in this small alley between two buildings. But--

".....I guess spiritual disasters have increased, so all the excellent people ran over to the exorcists. How terrible, that's really too dangerous....."

The voice came from behind him - and moreover it had suddenly sounded from a distance close enough to touch. He wanted to leap back and turn around, but his

body couldn't move, not even a finger - no, he couldn't even move his tongue.

This was magic. This was different from the charm magic he had made Natsume faint with, this was the Shugendo subjugation method, Unmoving Golden Chains. But, the other party had used it without a mantra , and he hadn't even felt the presence of the user. Stealth magic. It wasn't a normal stealth magic - he feared that it was the Marici Stealth Tantra[21].

The presence behind him slowly approached, making a clunky sound of footsteps. A cold, hard sound different from the sound of shoes treading on the ground echoed in the empty alleyway.

The practitioner who had bound him walked up in front of his bound self, but at the same time, the magic that bound his body also invaded his vision, binding his sight and ruthlessly plunging him into darkness.

He held open his gradually darkening eyes, forcing himself to see the practitioner's feet. A walking stick, and a toy-like fake wooden leg. In that moment, memories awoke in his mind.

When he had been in the Mystical Investigators, there was a rumor regarding a certain extraordinary Mystical Investigator that had long since become a legend. That man possessed the qualifications to become a National First-Class Onmyouji, one of the Twelve Divine Generals, but his name was never made public because of his position's secrecy.

He had left the frontline after losing his right leg, and it was rumored that only a few higher-ups knew where that Onmyouji had gone afterwards. He had originally believed it to be an empty rumor, and he had never thought he would encounter it in this kind of place.

Then--

As those thoughts flashed across his mind, the magic bound not only his vision, but also even his thinking.

At the same time as the light vanished from his eyes, his consciousness also fell into darkness.

"Oh my, this youngster even made me work overtime. How exhausting."

Ohtomo lowered his head to look at the Mystical Investigator fallen at his feet, muttering in annoyance.

Just then, a small calico cat walked into the alley where Ohtomo was with a meow.

Ohtomo frowned immediately upon seeing the cat. The cat didn't pay any heed to Ohtomo's reaction, soundlessly walking by his fake leg.

It checked the fallen Mystical Investigator and then looked up at Ohtomo.

"You've worked hard, Ohtomo-sensei."

Principal Kurahashi's voice came from the cat's mouth, and Ohtomo responded with an unwilling face: "Don't mention it."

"He was just a small fry anyway, to put it a bit nastily, but I guess there still are these kinds of hell-bent people around right now."

"He was probably deeply influenced for a long time. According to what I saw in the arena, his personality has a noticeably serious split."

"Oh, that one-person-two-roles skit? You saw that too, Principal?"

"Of course, they're my precious students."

The cat's expression remained unchanged, and Ohtomo turned his head and muttered: "......You happened to be monitoring me anyway, right?"

"What was that, Ohtomo-sensei?"

"No, Principal, I didn't say anything."

Ohtomo spoke innocently, beaming and showing an uncommon fake smile.

The cat straightened its posture.

"Let me properly thank you again, Ohtomo-sensei. But , the spectacle the students ran into this time was a bit too dangerous, and I cannot approve of it. You should have stepped in even when he summoned the imposter Kakugyouki."

"That would be rather difficult. Never mind an idiot stalker, what about the two big shots eyeing hungrily from the side? If I lost my last leg, my future career as a teacher would be troublesome."

"I can specially create a wheelchair shikigami for you. Free offer."

"Uwah, how frightful..... Why doesn't this old granny hurry up and die....."

"What?"

"No, nothing."

Ohtomo took a short breath, cowering back exaggeratedly.

"And I took precautions long ago. Seeing that wooden sword break really made me jump. Though it was a magical tool I made in a snap, I never thought it would overheat! But, because of that lesson, you could call that shakujou my proud work, and wasn't it actually very useful too? And also, your granddaughter did quite well! You saw the effects of my strategy yesterday, the friendship between them increased because of the sensei's toilsome planning, and that's why they could exert the strength of their beautiful friendship and deal with that evil fake oni!"

Ohtomo danced around and wantonly boasted about his own work. The cat shikigami wordlessly gazed at the fake-legged-Onmyouji, showing the customary skeptical gaze of a cat.

"Also, could it be that you were too disorganized this time, Principal? You knew that this idiot was a Yakou fanatic long ago, right? But to think you let him go..... that's a bit too risky."

The cat twisted its tail upon hearing Ohtomo's sarcasm , clearly not concerned at all.

"All I knew beforehand was that he was affiliated with the Twin-Horned Syndicate, I didn't notice anything further. This was a good opportunity for us."

"So you mean, you're really using your students as bait , and you even say things like 'I can't approve' to others."

"Please get used to these small things as soon as possible. Also, I warned the concerned parties long ago."

The cat spoke calmly, and Ohtomo frowned in displeasure.

"......Hypocrite....."

"What?"

"No no, nothing at all."

The cat sighed at the pretending Ohtomo, then turned its back to him, leaving the feel of a wry smile.

"I have to go inform the Onmyou Agency, so I leave the aftermath to you."

"......I don't get overtime pay?"

"Oh my, isn't this for your cute students? Money shouldn't be a problem, right?"

"......The problem isn't money, it's sincerity....."

Ohtomo complained, and the cat didn't inquire any further.

The cat left the alleyway with light steps, and its subordinate watched the shikigami go, childishly sticking his tongue out in the direction the cat vanished.

Part 3

Harutora was in his dorm rushing fiercely to do his homework on the first Sunday since coming to Tokyo.

It was beautiful outside, with the late summer sun shining bright. He had originally planned on going out to buy some daily necessities, but after that incident, he had been continuously resting for several days and had been unable to go to class. He was now desperately copying down detailed class notes in order to catch up. But he was just copying, and didn't actually understand the contents of the notes at all.

Touji, who had come to hand over the notes, was also inside Harutora's room. He sat by the window looking at the pleasant sunshine outside, talking about the subsequent developments that he had inquired about while Harutora was resting. Incidentally, Touji had only sent the notes over, and Tenma was the one who had organized the curriculum inside it. Touji generally didn't take notes during class, and Natsume had begun cooperating with Mystical Investigators with their investigation again, so she hadn't been able to properly attend class.

"......In the end, the puzzle was never solved."

"Yeah, just like the one from before we came here. Yakou fanatics found Natsume, but in the end we still aren't sure who was behind them."

The teachers who had finally arrived afterwards had been greatly surprised at the situation of the magic practice field and hurriedly protected Harutora and the others. The principal had contacted the Onmyou Agency herself, and the Mystical Investigators - Harutora's trust in Mystical Investigators had already slid a great deal - rushed to the scene one by one, gathering evidence around the scene and performing questioning. Harutora and the others had only left at ten in the evening, and their homeroom teacher Ohtomo had only arrived ten minutes before that, five whole hours apart from when Harutora and the others had encountered danger. His evaluation of his homeroom teacher finally hit rock bottom.

Later, they had heard that the escaped Mystical Investigator had already been arrested, but the interrogation process was unsuccessful. The deeper they investigated, the more evident it was that he had been used without knowing anything.

"He said he had other comrades, so did we single out other Yakou fanatics?"

"No, it seems like his memories were magically blocked, and the Onmyou Agency is trying to undo the magic, but they didn't reveal their identities to each other in the first place, so it's doubtful how much they can dig up."

"......What about that Kakugyouki?"

"As expected, it was fake, and of course that guy calling himself Hishamaru was also a huge lie, and he was magically influenced - simply put, he was fantasizing, so Natsume's words actually hit home with that guy."

Touji looked at the scenery outside the window, showing a sharp but detached gaze.

"......But that isn't very unexpected. That thing can't even be compared with the oni that I saw."

He mentioned it casually, but Harutora couldn't help but stop copying notes and turn his head to glance by the window.

"It's noisy." Harutora frowned slightly, and only then did he realize that the room where noise was coming from should have been an empty room. He couldn't help but wonder whether someone was secretly using that empty room as a warehouse.

As he thought, Touji who had returned to natural at some point continued to speak:

"What's interesting is that the styles by which the fake Kakugyouki's and kodoku's vessels were made are completely different, like they weren't made by the same person."

"Th, That means..... That person didn't make the oni shikigami?"

"It seems like he believed it was the true Kakugyouki, and according to his statements, there was someone pulling the strings."

"Who?"

"I don't know that."

Touji replied coldly. After all, the incident was still under investigation, and there would be a day when they

could get more details. They could understand very few things right now.

Just then, a huge sound came from the room next door, like someone was moving things around.

"What in the world is going on?"

Harutora was just planning on going over to inquire when the sound of knocking came from outside the room .

He stood up and passed through the room to open the door. Kon was standing outside the door with a red tray in her hands and cups of tea placed on top. She had crashed through the first floor to make tea just because her master had a guest.

"Oh, so it was Kon. Thanks for helping to make tea."

Saying this, he opened the door and moved aside to let Kon enter the room, but Kon stood in the corridor without moving.

"H, H, Harutora-sama, actually....."

Kon's ears twitched anxiously and she glanced towards the corridor - at the neighboring room where noises came from. Harutora asked: "What is it?", leaning his head out of the door and looking into the corridor.

Natsume was standing there.

She was in front of the open door to the neighboring room, looking at the condition inside with many boxes and suitcases by her feet. Harutora's eyes widened in surprise.

"Natsume?"

What are you doing here - Just as he thought of opening his mouth to ask, a humanoid shadow came from inside the neighboring room. Natsume didn't pay any heed to the shocked Harutora, her attitude clearly composed. The shadow knelt in front of Natsume, picking up a box placed in the corridor and then returning into the room.

Harutora ran out into the corridor, panicked.

"N, N, Natsume? What is that thing?"

"Oh, Harutora, is your homework going well?"

Natsume turned around and smiled like she had only finally noticed him now, her look inexplicably happy.

"I'm doing it right now. What in the world is that black thing?"

"That's a simple shikigami that I made to help me move luggage."

"Move what luggage?"

"I will also be living here starting today."

Natsume spoke proudly and Harutora gaped dumbly upon hearing that.

"Live here..... You?"

"Didn't I say that?"

"But this is a male dorm!?"

"I'm a guy, remember."

Natsume spoke self-assuredly, and Harutora couldn't find words to refute it for a while. Though he wanted to take this as a joke, he was very clear that she wasn't joking about this, regardless of how little he understood about Natsume's true intentions.

Natsume pursed her lips angrily as she looked at the silent Harutora.

"You're really slow, Harutora. Such a big incident happened before, but could it be that it didn't warn you at all?"

"W, Warn..... What warning?"

"Do I need to say? Of course the fact that I could be in danger at any time!"

".....So?"

"How come you still don't understand! You're my shikigami, and it's your duty to protect me all twenty-four hours of the day!"

Natsume spoke seriously as if she were a class president explaining the class rules to another child.

"Uh, so you want me to guard you, but you....."

You won't need to fear anything as long as you have Hokuto, so it doesn't matter if I'm there or not, right?

Harutora almost voiced those words.

"But you were the one who wanted me to do that."

"Me?"

"You wanted me to be brave and rely on other people."

"Ah....."

Harutora couldn't help but blush slightly as he recalled the words he had said and his surging emotions at the time. His master also blushed as she quietly gazed at her shikigami. As he looked at that trust-filled look, Harutora couldn't help but feel that Natsume, who had been willing to change her style to fit his opinion, was even more sincere and cute than usual.....

"But, first! Isn't this a bit too reckless? It's impossible for you to live in the male dorm!"

"Help me."

"Help? How can I help you!"

"What, didn't you want me to rely on you?"

Natsume pouted again, raising her eyes to look at Harutora as she spoke, as if condemning him for being heartless. The question made Harutora speechless, and only then did he notice that Kon and Touji were peeking their heads out from his room and watching the liveliness with high spirits.

Just then-- "Huh? What are you doing, Harutora-kun?" Tenma walked onto the floor of the dorm. Not only had he given out his class notes, he had even taken up the burden of coming to explain them. Kyouko also followed behind him.

"Tenma, and..... Kurahashi? Why did you come too?"

".....What, I'm not welcome?"

"No, that's not it....."

He had been lying in bed unconscious after the incident had ended and hadn't spoken with Kyouko. Though they had banded together to escape a crisis, the

two had been incompatible before, and Harutora didn't know what kind of attitude to take for a while.

As Harutora was hesitating and indecisive--

"Tenma-kun, Kurahashi-san, thank you for the incident before and sorry for troubling you." Natsume stepped forward.

Tenma and Kurahashi seemed not to have expected Natsume to be here as well. Natsume's sudden appearance, and moreover her bow of thanks, made the two of them flustered.

"D, Don't say that, especially since..... I wasn't much help at all."

"That's not true, I'm very grateful for your help."

Natsume thanked again with a sincere attitude.

Generally, Natsume was stubborn and unwilling to mingle with others, but once she opened her heart, she was sincere like a child. Tenma and Kyouko couldn't help but show a stiff smile facing this surprising change.

"Kyouko-san, I need to thank you as well."

"Uh, that....."

"Though I said many harsh words to you, please believe that I have no ill will. Also, you were willing to help me even though I held a bad attitude towards you, so I am truly grateful. I will imitate your tolerance, so I hope we can get along in the future."

"....."

Natsume stared with her innocent eyes at the speechless Kyouko. Her face was blooming in a flowery smile, and Kyouko watched blankly, her face flushing redder and redder.

"Don't say that..... I was just....."

She replied shyly, unable to help but turn her head bashfully before she had finished speaking.

Then-- "H, Harutora-kun, come here for a bit--"

She pulled Harutora's arm and left behind the stunned Natsume and Tenma, running out of the corridor, walking down the stairs, and bringing the surprised Harutora into the stairwell.

"W, What is it, why did you suddenly take me here?"

"Could Natsume-kun have thought of the thing from before? Did he remember his promise with me?"

Kyouko's face was extremely red as she questioned Harutora excitedly. She seemed to have misunderstood Natsume's sudden reversal of attitude as her having remembered their meeting before.

"Uh....." Harutora replied awkwardly. "....Sorry, I didn't check with him, but I don't think the situation is what you're thinking."

"Th, Then why did he suddenly change his attitude?"

"Actually, you can't really call it sudden. Didn't he say that he was grateful that you came forward to help? That's why."

Harutora explained. Kyouko's lips tightened as if she were still unable to accept that statement. When Harutora stopped speaking, Kyouko suddenly realized that she was still holding his arm, and hurriedly let go.

"It's true that the only thing in his mind are the matters about himself and the Tsuchimikado family, but those

are all actions taken unconsciously to protect himself. Once he thinks of you as a companion, his attitude will naturally become sincere. That person's personality is actually like a child's, and because of that, his actions are also very simple." Harutora spoke straightforwardly.

"Companion? Me? But I was so over-the-top towards Harutora-kun[22] earlier....."

"Though I don't understand why you're always looking for trouble with the Tsuchimikado family, he doesn't hate you, nor is he mad. He didn't hate you before this incident happened either."

She just felt that you were unreasonable - Harutora didn't say that, shrugging his shoulders.

Upon hearing this, Kyouko suddenly lowered her head meekly.

Her red-tinged face turned bright, as if a long, dark, night had finally become dawn, welcoming the light of hope. She was clearly in glowing spirits and extremely energetic.

"I....."

"What is it?"

"I..... really love Natsume-kun."

"I see, that's grea- What did you say?"

Harutora couldn't help but doubt whether he had heard wrongly. Unfazed by Harutora's shock, Kyouko showed a pure, shy maidenly smile on her face.

"Though it's regretful that Natsume-kun forgot about the promise between us..... I actually realize that I can't fault him, since it was something from many years ago after all. So, I've also given up on confirming with him - no, I won't give up, but for now I have decided to start again from the beginning. I finally understand that I've loved Natsume-kun all the way up to now."

"....."

Harutora was stunned, his eyes wide from shock, gazing at the nonsensical Kyouko. The reversal in her attitude beat Natsume's. Where in the world had that animosity-filled girl vanished to? What had he endured so much suffering for?

"Y, You love Natsume? But then why--"

"Idiot, don't say it that loudly! Natsume-kun is talented and cool and gentle, and in particular he looks pure on the outside, but he's very tender on the inside, so why can't I love him? Also, I've loved him since I was small, so you aren't allowed to oppose it."

"I, I didn't mean to, it's just that....."

Her face flushed, Kyouko spoke in a torrent as if to hide her shyness. Harutora had long since known that they had met, but this was the first time he had heard that Kyouko had fallen in love with Natsume after that encounter. He didn't know how to respond for a while. Kyouko then said "right," seeming like she had thought of something.

"I helped you that much during that incident, so you owe me. Help me get together with Natsume-kun as thanks."

"Get together!?"

"R, Right, what's wrong with that? Shouldn't you be helping me out? In fact, I could count as your savior! Could it be that you're unwilling?"

Kyouko transformed, regaining her original personality, staring at Harutora with her eyebrows furrowed and an intimidating tone.

"I, It's not that I'm unwilling, but it's really hard for me to help....."

"Why?"

"Uh, he actually has quite a few secrets, or maybe I should say 'traditions' that he has to respect, so....."

Since he couldn't reveal Natsume's true identity, he couldn't help Kyouko out with this.

Kyouko gazed at the stuck Harutora with a fierce look, and suddenly, she showed an understanding and superior look as if she had an epiphany.

"Did you fall for me?"

Harutora couldn't conceal his shock, his eyes going round.

".....Hah?"

"So that was it..... You looked at me like you were in a trance the first time you entered the classroom too. Right, that's definitely how it is."

"No, wait, that's a misunderstanding!"

Harutora hastily shook his head. Actually, he had indeed felt quite good about Kyouko the first day of school, but he hadn't thought she had noticed.

Kyouko was very cute - though limited to the exterior - and that was undeniable, but that 'good' first impression had been torn to pieces since the first day. Of course, he didn't have the courage to say so in front of the person herself.

"Unfortunately, my feelings are like I said just now, so you have to help me out, understood? It's a promise."

Kyouko moved towards Harutora, looking up at him and repeating herself with a raised index finger. She didn't listen to Harutora's opinion at all, making Harutora's head hurt.

But on the other hand, it wasn't unexpected for that extremely self-confident action to show up on Kyouko's

feminine body. It was more suitable for her than when he had seen her in the classroom for the first time, or when she had quarreled with Natsume, or even when she had called Harutora out to complain. Her eyes shone gloriously, her lips raised happily. Her appearance right now could display her unique charm the most, a proof that was better than a thousand words.

Willful, yet charming.

.....Huh?

In that moment--

A faded scene from the past suddenly emerged in Harutora's mind.

An old and ancient faint memory, making him feel curious and nostalgic - That memory was like it was displayed in a cabinet, still a beautiful, dazzling treasure even if it had been half-buried in the sands of time.....

"--Harutora?"

A low, oppressive, and tense-sounding voice called out. When he turned around, Natsume was gazing at the conversing Harutora and Kyouko from the second-floor

corridor like an encore of the scene from the academy emergency stairwell. Harutora's heart leaped, and Kyouko's face instantly reddened, replying in a soft, small voice: "Natsume-kun."

"Sorry, Harutora-kun suddenly said that he had something important to talk to me about."

"Me?"

"But we're already done talking. Though I came over without warning today, could I go in?"

"Can you? .....Isn't that my room?"

Harutora complained, but Kyouko pretended like she didn't hear. Natsume replied: "Go ahead." Kyouko joyfully walked up the stairs.

Before she turned into the corridor, she sent Harutora a look warning him not to forget about their promise, like a queen dispatching her servant with a strong, arrogant look. Kyouko was the precious daughter of the Kurahashi family, and it seemed like it was truly quite fitting that others called her a 'princess'.

Just as Harutora was pondering over how to deal with the trouble Kyouko had stirred up-- "......Sorry to disturb your chat." Natsume interrupted him, her voice and gaze icy like a freezer. She leaned her shoulder against the wall lightly, lowering her head to gaze coldly at the stairwell. Harutora instinctively felt that the situation was extremely dangerous.

"W, What is it, Natsume, could you have heard all of that?"

"No."

Natsume replied fiercely, and Harutora could conclude from that tone that she had definitely heard something.

The problem was what she had heard...

"......Harutora, you can 'fall for' whoever you like, but don't forget your responsibility."

"I knew it, you heard everything starting there!"

Why had she started eavesdropping from the absolute worst place as if she were finding an opportunity to take

aim at him? Harutora hastily climbed the stairs, but Natsume deliberately moved away from him, coldly leaving her shikigami behind.

"You're wrong, Natsume, it's not like you think!"

"It doesn't concern me whether I'm wrong or not, and I don't care even if that's true. I don't care at all, I don't even care a tiny bit."

"You clearly care a lot! And you're extremely concerned!"

Harutora stumbled over his words, and Natsume turned her back to Harutora, unable to restrain her anger any longer.

She mumbled quietly:

"......Harutora-kun, you're such a playboy....."

"H, Hold on, Natsume... san? Are you scared about your secret getting out?"

"......And you're all talk....."

"Also, I'm hearing all of your feelings, Natsume-san. It's truly a misunderstanding."

"......You said you wanted to help me, but now you're behaving like this, so it was all talk....."

"Please listen to me, everything is a misunderstanding! "

At some point, Natsume had crossed her arms angrily, complaints constantly flowing from her mouth. Harutora desperately tried to explain to that small back.

Black hair flowed down Natsume's back.

A ribbon tied up that hair, waving lightly between the master and the one serving his master.

Many years before...

She had long since heard from her parents that the Tsuchimikado family had a child about the same age as her, but Kyouko had never seen him.

Her grandmother and parents didn't express it, but she could tell from her other relatives' expressions that the Tsuchimikado family was past its time and was on the edge of decline. Those people slandered maliciously from the shadows, but they actually unconsciously knew that they belonged to the group that was 'declining'. Because of this, inauspicious shadows had fallen over the Tsuchimikado family in the young Kyouko's heart, leaving a abhorrent yet helpless bad impression.

In front of that family's child, even the one whom others cared for as the Kurahashi family 'princess' would have a 'lower standing', and being unable to keep her ' princess' identity made her incomparably upset. These thoughts troubled her, and she was uneasy inside even though she feigned a strong exterior.

So that day - when she heard that child was bedridden because of an illness, the first time she entered the Tsuchimikado family's ancient residence the butterflies in Kyouko's stomach calmed down. She quickly regained her original majestic arrogance and her mood brightened , since she had originally been thinking she would have a showdown with that child.

Why don't you go play in the courtyard.

When Kyouko heard this, she walked into the courtyard with a fearless mood, playing to her heart's content in the vast courtyard.

By the time she noticed, her ribbon had long since disappeared.

It wasn't an ordinary ribbon, it was a precious ribbon that her grandmother had made for her. She had tied that ribbon to encourage herself not to lose to the Tsuchimikado child. It was her most treasured valuable.

She desperately searched for the ribbon with a teary face and ended up losing her way in the courtyard. The courtyard that was her personal kingdom became an unfamiliar environment in the blink of an eye. The sun was bright in the sky, but the tall trees blocked the sunlight, casting darkness over Kyouko's heart.

She had fallen into the terrifying hands of the Tsuchimikado, and she feared that she wouldn't be able to return home. When she thought of this, she was so frightened that she hid behind a tree and sobbed. Just then, he suddenly appeared.

He was a boy whose age was similar to hers, and he seemed lively and mischievous.

He noticed Kyouko and asked with surprise and round eyes: "Are you crying?". His honest, gentle tone caught Kyouko's heart that was falling into deep despair, rescuing her.

Kyouko hurriedly wiped her tears, replying in a huff: " I wasn't crying." The boy was surprised. Though he wanted to pursue the question, Kyouko stubbornly repeated in an agitated voice that she wasn't crying, and he finally closed his mouth in confusion. Kyouko's anger had intimidated him.

Kyouko regained her original imposing manner upon seeing this and thought in her heart that she should take this moment to let this child understand completely that she definitely wouldn't lose to the Tsuchimikado.

Kyouko took on a provocative attitude.

"Are you this family's child?"

"Huh? I'm not."

"Liar, aren't you Tsuchimikado?"

"Yeah, that's right, but....."

The boy still wanted to continue saying something, but Kyouko interrupted him, loudly proclaiming her identity and demands:

"I'm Kurahashi, your relative. I came here today to visit, so I'm an important guest. When an important guest like me loses her ribbon in the courtyard, as this family's child, you should apologize to me, right?"

The boy blankly stared at Kyouko for a good while.

"You're so cute, but you're like a boy."

Kyouko's rock-hard imposing manner almost crumbled upon hearing those words. You're so cute - those words she had long since grown tired of hearing now lead to a shock different from before, bursting inside her chest. At the same time, the following words gave her anger and shame that she hadn't had before. She became restless and couldn't help but think of fleeing.

She desperately suppressed the chaos inside her.

"So, how will you repay me?"

"Alright, I'll look for it with you."

The boy replied readily. She didn't dare to believe him for a while.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"You'll really help me look?"

"Yeah."

The boy nodded his head with a smile, sincere and gentle and guileless, the same as when he had asked her whether she was crying.

So, the two of them looked for the ribbon together.

As they were looking for the lost ribbon, the boy took the initiative to chat with Kyouko. Kyouko replied coldly at the start, but she soon stripped herself of the tension in her heart, even laughing. Shouldn't he be in bed because he was sick? That doubt flashed through her mind for a moment, but that question instantly became insignificant when she looked at the healthy boy before her.

Kyouko didn't end her princess act for a moment, but not only did the boy not show any dislike of it at all, on the contrary he would often tease her for always being so serious. Strangely, those words didn't enrage her, and she even cheerfully pretended to be mad.

"You're really like a boy."

"That's so rude."

"Watch out, there are rocks there, be careful."

"I got it, why didn't you tell me earlier."

His jokes made her laugh, and even if she was mad she couldn't help but smile. She gradually became fascinated with that boy, and time flew by.

In the end, they still hadn't found the ribbon.

The sun was in the west, with the courtyard rendered in the evening twilight, and the boy was clearly at a loss, faced with Kyouko asking about what she should do. He committed quite apologetically and with a difficult expression:

"I'll look carefully again."

"Really? Will you really find it for me?"

"Yeah, I'll do my best and look again."

"Okay, then I'll forgive you, but..."

Kyouko moved closer to the boy as she said this, looking up at him and raising her index finger as she repeated.

"Listen, don't you dare forget this, it's a promise."

The boy was a bit frightened, nodding his head continuously with a serious face. Kyouko felt completely joyful for some reason when she saw the boy with that expression.

The next time they met, if she took the ribbon from the boy's hand, she would tie it into her hair right then and there and let him see her cute side.

She definitely couldn't let that boy think of her like a boy again.

Kyouko swore in her heart, saying goodbye to the boy. She only remembered after she left that she still hadn't asked for the boy's name.

She would have to ask her grandmother after returning home.

As for the name she heard from her grandmother's mouth later, she treasured it in her heart, never once forgetting it.

...That had happened many years ago.

That past event in a sunny afternoon was always hiding deep inside Harutora's memories.

Several years ago, perhaps even decades ago...

A bright moon hung in the sky.

"Are you going?'

An oni asked.

It was a strong, powerful oni who had lived for a long time. After his master died, he no longer served a human as a shikigami, and returned back to a simple oni again - a legendary oni. Now, he believed that there would never be a reason to continue such loyalty. He

recognized the emotional connection between him and his master, and he liked him, but since he loved being free, he didn't find any meaning in continuing to be loyal to someone who was dead.

However, his partner didn't think so.

"I'm going."

His partner spoke resolutely without a trace of hesitation. They had promised that he would endlessly wait on, regardless of how many tribulations and how many years. His partner would embark on a lengthy adventure in order to fulfill that promise, seeking to reunite with his lost master.

"We'll part ways here. Take care of yourself."

After saying this, his partner left him without turning back. That uptight, dedicated attitude had always annoyed him, and he had made fun of it many times.

But now, it felt incomparably dazzling. Why was that?

"......What a truly devoted fellow."

He smiled wryly and murmured quietly as he watched his partner's departing back.

The moon in the sky quietly watched the separation of the two.

...Many years had already passed since then, even decades.

In the one-armed oni's memories, the final curtain was pulled down over those glorious years.

Tokyo Ravens:Volume2 Afterword

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ Literally lion-dogs. Stone sculptures set in the entrance of Japanese shrines. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/komainu
2. ↑ Japanese chess.
3. ↑ Hell to translate. Don't expect any accuracy in these names.
4. ↑ The Heisei era began in 1989.
5. ↑ [1]
6. ↑ In the Japanese text, Kon speaks in a clearly old-fashioned manner of speech.
7. ↑ A Chinese idiom expressing that rabbits dig three entrances to their dens in case of emergencies.
8. ↑ Also known as Dharmapala. [2]
9. ↑ Two sects of Buddhism.
10. ↑ Japanese 'sacred rope'. [3]
11. ↑ Ohtomo says the first line and Harutora says the second.
12. ↑ [4]
13. ↑ [5]
14. ↑ Commonly known as the North Star. [6]
15. ↑ This makes sense in Japanese and Chinese. 'Yakou (夜)' is formed by compressing characters of 'night's radiance ()' .
16. ↑ Japanese youkai. [7]

17. ↑ The correct name. The M.I. is saying this with his 'Kakugyouki voice'.
18. ↑ Tiger is 'tora' in Japanese, which is the same 'tora' as Harutora.
19. ↑ Probably referring to Doman, the old man in the limousine.
20. ↑ The Mystical Investigator's. Tricky pronouns.
21. ↑ Marici is a Buddhist deity. A tantra is a method of meditation. [8] [9]
22. ↑ Not a typo.